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MOUNTAIN MOSE, THE GORGE OUTLAW; Or, LIGHT HORSE LEON'S FIVE FIGHTS FOR LIFE.

BY MAJOR SAM S. HALL—"Buckskin Sam,"

AUTHOR OF "DIAMOND DICK," "THE LONE STAR GAMBLER," "THE TERRIBLE TONKAWAY," "KIT CARSON, JR.," "BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC.



ONE DESPERATE BOUND, AND YOUNG LEON'S LEFT PALM WAS CLAPPED OVER THE MOUNTAIN OUTLAW'S MOUTH, HIS HEAD WAS FORCED BACKWARD, BENDING HIS BODY AND SWELLING HIS BREAST. THEN UP SHOT THE BOWIE.

Mountain Mose,

THE GORGE OUTLAW;

OR,

Light Horse Leon's Five Fights for Life.

BY BUCKSKIN SAM,

(MAJOR SAM S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "KIT CARSON, JR.," "WILD WILL,"
"THE CROOKED THREE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

JUMBO JIM.

In the year 185—, there resided on the James river, in Virginia, but a short distance from Lynchburg, a planter by the name of Anthony Andrews—commonly called Colonel Andrews.

The colonel was a widower, with but one child, a most lovely maiden of fifteen summers, at the time that our narrative opens.

The family was of noble lineage—one of the genuine F. F. V's—proud and aristocratic, and had been very wealthy, but that was in the days past. The present head of the house had lost considerable at cards and horse-racing, and the estate, as well as some of the slaves, was heavily mortgaged.

Circumstances bearing on our story, that were connected with the sale of the Andrews plantation, will be explained in due time.

It is only necessary to mention here, that Colonel Andrews had decided to dispose of his old home, and all the personal property that could not readily be transported by his wagon-train, and migrate to Texas, where, with what he could realize by the sale, he believed he could keep up the free and easy, luxurious life that had always been his, and which was no longer possible for him in the Old Dominion.

Arline Andrews, the daughter of the colonel, was one of the loveliest maidens imaginable, full of fun and animation, and beloved by all who knew her. She had glorious golden hair, rich and wavy; and her eyes were of a heavenly blue, while her complexion was like the blush rose when bursting into bloom.

Her features were of purely Grecian mold, her nose and mouth small and well-formed, and her lips rare, ripe, and tempting. She was Venus like in form and face, graceful as a wild fawn, and lively, as a cricket; her limbs were well-rounded and perfect, and in short she was a well-developed and lovely maiden, at the early age at which she is introduced to the reader.

The best of private teachers had been secured to instruct her; for the colonel could not feel at ease, or happy, without the light of his home.

Everything that heart could desire was hers; her father delighting to anticipate her slightest wish.

After Colonel Andrews had disposed of the old homestead, and much of his effects, he invited all his friends and neighbors to join him on a grand hunting and fishing expedition, to the Blue Ridge; the Peaks of Otter being plainly to be seen from the Andrews plantation.

At the time of which we write, there was an abundance of game in the vicinity of the Blue Ridge, such as black bear, turkeys, and deer; and in addition to this, there was excellent trout-fishing in the mountain streams. Fox-hunting was also a favorite sport with all classes.

Rather reluctantly, Colonel Andrews gave his daughter permission to accompany the party; for, it was their intention to camp out for several days and nights. Arline was in raptures, anticipating glorious rides amid the wild flowers, and wilder scenes of the mountains.

Fair as fair could be, and happy as well, the lovely girl sped upon her pony, with merry song and rippling laugh, to the right and left, and oftentimes far ahead of the line of wagons.

A pack of hounds was included in the outfit, a negro keeper having the animals in leash in the rear of the party; and it was long past sunset when they encamped at the base of that romantic range, the Blue Ridge of Virginia. All were weary after their journey of nearly thirty miles, and they partook of the evening meal with appetites born of the exhilarating air of the mountains, permeated, as it was, with the balsamic perfume of the cedar and pine.

Sport, until the following day, was of course out of the question; but, at an early hour, the camp presented a scene of bustling preparation.

All the slaves, except the keeper of the hounds, were ordered to remain in camp; Colonel Andrews refusing most positively to allow Arline to accompany the party in the hunt, as there would be danger from wild beasts, and, aside from that, it would be a most fatiguing and hazardous trip.

Arline, however, was given permission, to ride along the foot of the range, and gather wild flowers, or fish for trout in the numerous streams.

Jumbo Jim, a slave of the colonel, and a great favorite with the young mistress, was ordered to attend and guard her; he being

armed with rifle and bowie-knife. Arline did not leave the camp until the large hunting-party had become lost to view amid the craggy, tree-covered spurs of the Blue Ridge.

Then, with laughing glee, she galloped along the base of the range, followed by Jim, proud, as usual, to have charge of his beautiful young mistress.

Gypsy, the pony of Arline Andrews, was quite a mettlesome little nag, and was now considerably excited by the wild mountain scenery; at times darting, with a snort of terror, to one side, as a dark rock became revealed, when galloping around some of the thickets along the route.

All this pleased Arline greatly, and at length she guided the pony up a huge gulch that seemed to have been formed by some tremendous convulsion of nature, which had cut the range in twain.

Upon either side of the gulch were huge boulders, clumps of dwarf pines and cedars, and the crumbled debris of gigantic masses of granite, that had fallen from the towering heights, perhaps many centuries previous.

Yawning chasms, projecting points of adamantine rock, and winding narrow shelves, relieved somewhat by the dark green foliage of the trees—such was the wild and uninviting view, but grand and imposing withal, and intensely interesting to an ardent admirer of Nature, as was Arline.

Jumbo Jim was impressed with superstitious awe, recalling the many weird tales of blood, and horrible deaths from wild beasts, that he had often heard recounted around the campfires at night.

The bed of the gulch was impassable, except in the middle, but a few feet being free from jagged rocks; and the rippling laughter of the maiden, as she advanced higher and further up the gorge, heretofore always so sweet to the ears of the slave, now caused his face to become of ashen hue, and his eyes to shoot out with horror, at what was now a series of unnatural elfish echoes.

Jumbo Jim actually trembled. The very song and laughter of his young mistress seemed to him as sounds, that would not only betray their presence in the dark and unearthly gulch, but were as taunts that would infuriate the demon denizens of the mountains, fearful shapes that were now being conjured up in his terrified imagination.

In Jim's belief, the spirits of all human beings, slain by either their fellow-men or wild beasts, yet hovered near the scene of the tragedy; seeking, in revenge, to lure all who invaded the wild, rock-bound retreats to their destruction.

Yet, for all this, the poor fellow could not utter a word in remonstrance, but preceded his young mistress, his horse seeming to partake, to some extent, of his feelings. His only attempted outcry to Arline was but a gurgling, gasping sound; his fingers clutching around his rifle, now, in his opinion, as useless as a dead branch, against the fearful spooks of the mountains.

The gulch grew darker, wilder, and more unearthly in aspect, as it turned into the heart of the range, northward. Not a ray of sunlight penetrated into its dizzy depths, and it was not strange that the ignorant negro was thus impressed. The wonder was, that Arline dared advance within the wild walls, much less to ride on as she was going.

The young girl had urged her pony at speed, laughing merrily at the animal's fright. This amused her, but she was almost constantly obliged to use her full exertions, and to bend her attention upon Gypsy, to guide him, and to maintain her seat in the saddle. Thus, much of the weird grandeur of the scene was lost to her.

In this manner her attention was occupied upon turning a sharp bend in the gulch, the swell of the same being extremely broken and rugged, having thick clumps of dwarf pines along the base of the walls.

Hardly had Arline thus guided Gypsy around the point of rocks and pines, when, with a terrific snort, the pony bounded into the air, toward the opposite side of the gulch. So unexpected was this rapid start, that the maiden was thrown forward, as the animal struck the ground; and then claspings the neck of her affrighted favorite, thoroughly shaken and alarmed, she succeeded in relieving her foot from the stirrup, and swinging around beneath the beast's neck, remained in that position, claspings it.

But little time, however, had Arline to reflect, or even give a thought to her situation; for, with another snort of terror, the pony reared upward, whirled upon its hinder hoofs, forcing her to loosen her hold upon his neck, and stagger along the rocky floor of the gorge. Then Gypsy galloped madly back, the way that he had come, still snorting with fright.

Strong, almost overpowering as was the superstitious terror of Jumbo Jim, his love and respect for his young mistress was still stronger. In his fears for her safety, he urged his horse onward, a piercing shriek from Arline causing him to strike the animal a terrible blow with his rifle.

Madly the steed sprang forward, and the next instant Jim beheld his beautiful young mistress standing on the west side of the basin, her arms extended, as if warding off something terrible.

Her form was bent forward, her eyes starting with horror, and her golden hair hanging in wild confusion about her head and shoulders.

Not six feet from Arline, waddling toward her, was a small chunky animal, which Jim knew was a black bear's cub; and instantly he raised his rifle, not giving himself time for thought, and pulled the trigger. The next moment, his horse bounded, with frantic plunge, almost directly upon the dying cub, and then reared high upon its hind legs.

Jumbo Jim was thrown to the ground, but without receiving injury, regaining his feet in an instant. Then came a wild shriek of mortal terror from the trembling lips of poor Arline.

The brave and gigantic negro rushed to his young mistress, standing in front of her, and facing the danger, the character of which he at once realized. He knew that Arline had not been thus frightened by the bear's cub.

Well he knew that the old she-bear was not far away, and most bitterly did he regret having shot the cub, for the dam would now be furious.

All thoughts of the demoniac spirits of the gulch were banished from the mind of Jumbo Jim, and crowded to the background by real, tangible flesh and blood; by brutes, which, if he did not fight them like a fiend, would tear his loved young mistress literally in pieces.

No sooner did the faithful slave turn about to face the point of rocks and pines, than his apprehensive suspicions were more than verified; for two more cubs were whining over the one he had slain, and the same instant his gaze became fixed in his front.

A gigantic she-bear, with fierce, deep growls, crushed through the pines, her eyes glaring like coals of fire, her lips curled away from the gleaming, terrible teeth, in the most savage fury, as she smelled the body of her dying cub.

Then followed a terrible scene. The unwieldy and clumsy brute-mother seemed suddenly to grow agile and almost lightning-like in her motions, from the frenzy that ruled her; for the beast sprang at once upright, and toward the waiting Jumbo Jim, its huge paws in air, and its teeth gleaming savagely, while shriek upon shriek from poor Arline cut the air.

The negro braced himself, and raised his rifle, which he had no time to reload, above his head; but, so agonized was the poor fellow at the appealing screams of his little mistress, and rendered almost hopeless by the formidable appearance of the terrible brute, that, for an instant, he lost his presence of mind, his rifle remaining poised in the air, and clutched in both hands—his broad breast being thus left unguarded.

Electric-like, the powerful paw of the infuriated bear shot sideways, the long claws projecting; and, the next moment, Jumbo Jim lay prostrate, his ribs shattered, and torn apart, his vitals protruding from the terrible gaping wound, and his life-blood welling out upon the rocky bed of the gulch!

Paralyzed with horror and dread, her tongue glued to the roof of her mouth, her features drawn and ghastly, her eyes fairly bulging from their sockets, and her golden hair disheveled—thus stood Arline Andrews, incapable of speech or movement; the body of her faithful and devoted slave, mangled and quivering in death at her feet, and the terrible monster bear standing with glaring eyes, gleaming teeth, red and lolling tongue, and blood-dripping paws, within five paces of her fright-frozen form!

CHAPTER II.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

SOME twenty feet above the bed of the gulch, directly over the thicket of dwarf pine through which the huge bear had crashed to protect her cubs, was a rocky projection, which formed a wide shelf, above which towered the irregular side of the gulch. This shelf was fringed with stunted cedars, which prevented any one from below, unless through careful inspection, being aware that there was any possible footing for any animal except a mountain-climber, above the bed of the gulch.

Neither Arline nor poor Jumbo Jim had cast a glance upward after the discovery of the cubs; and, from the time the bear appeared upon the scene, the eyes of both had been fixed upon the terrible beast. They had not the remotest idea that any human being was within miles of them; consequently, when Arline saw her brave attendant lying in the agonies of death before her, all hope left her heart.

But, notwithstanding her apparently helpless position, death in a horrible form staring her in the eyes, help was near at hand.

As the first piercing shriek of the terrified maiden echoed from cleft and crag, a youth of not more than eighteen years of age, mounted upon a strong and sure-footed horse, was approaching the abrupt bend from the opposite

direction to that which had been traveled by the young girl and her sable escort.

This youth was attired in leggins and hunting-shirt of buckskin, fringed in the style of the border, and with light but serviceable boots, and a slouched hat.

His features were regular, and so handsome as to be almost feminine in appearance. His eyes were sharp and piercing, of hazel hue; and his hair dark-brown and wavy, being worn low, and reaching to his shoulders.

Straight as an arrow and perfectly formed, his glance and movements in the saddle showed him to be quick as a flash in motion and action.

All in all, he was one who would at once command the attention, admiration and trust of any intelligent observer.

The moment that he heard the unaccountable shriek, this mountain youth, who was armed with a rifle, revolver, and hunting-knife, jerked his horse to a halt, and, with the most intense amazement, listened for a repetition of the sound.

He had not reached a position near the point of the abrupt bend, that enabled him to gain a view of the bed of the gulch, where the tragedy was so soon to be enacted; but he distinctly heard the clatter of hoofs, as the pony sped away from the scene of its fright.

Instantly, Leon Lisle—for such was the name of the young man—knew that there must be a human being in the gulch in deadly peril, and undoubtedly a female who had been, as the sounds indicated, thrown from her horse; and he urged his own animal along the shelving rocks as fast as was possible, reaching a position directly over the fearful scene we have described, but unable to see below him on account of the fringe of cedars.

Springing from his horse, Leon ran quickly toward the thicket, his pace hastened by the series of shrieks uttered by Arline, as the huge bear crashed through the dwarf pines.

Parting the branches as soon as he reached the edge of the shelf, Leon Lisle shot a quick glance downward, guided by the sounds; and the view that caught his eye chained him to the spot, rendering him incapable for the moment of thought or action.

But at once he realized that he was looking upon the most angelic maiden that had ever blessed his vision; or, as he truly believed, had ever before been seen by mortal eyes. And more than that, that her life now depended upon himself.

But a flitting glance at the dead and living cubs, the infuriated bear, and the negro, whose rifle, he knew from the manner in which it was now used, had not been reloaded—but one glance was sufficient to decide Leon that the old she-bear would be the victor, did he not "take a hand in the game."

In regard to his action in the affair, there was not the slightest hesitation. Instantly Leon perceived that, if it was necessary, his own life must be sacrificed to save this helpless and beautiful girl.

When the bear arose upon its haunches, then Leon knew that there was no time to lose, and he whirled about, running to his horse; for he well knew that he could not descend from the shelf without making a long *detour*, unless he used a rope, or some such means.

Slashing the neck-rope from his horse with knife, rifle in hand, and blade between his teeth, the youth bounded to the edge of the shelf again, making fast one end of the rope to a cedar near the ground.

This done, he cast the slack over the edge of the shelf, slung his rifle by the strap over his shoulder, and then quickly, hand under hand, lowered himself to the rough rocks below, amid the pines at the base of the gulch side.

One rapid glance had told him that the burly black had been killed by the bear, and that the life of the maiden depended upon his immediate action, and that in a moment's time.

Notwithstanding the fearful terror which he knew the young girl must be suffering, Leon dared not make an outcry to relieve her mind by assuring her that help was at hand. If he did so, the bear might turn and discover him, and then, fearing that he might lose his prey, would spring upon and tear the helpless maiden in pieces.

No sooner did the young man's feet touch the rocks, than he unslung and cocked his rifle, and then, holding the weapon ready, ran at reckless speed over the rough and rock-strewn way, directly through the pines, and toward the bear, kicking furiously as he went, the living cubs that were now whining over their mate, shot by Jumbo Jim.

The cubs snarled, and made strange sounds, as Leon had intended they should do, thus drawing the attention of the mother bear, at the very instant she was about to seize the horrified Arline.

This forethought of the youth's in reality saved the maiden's life, for with a horrible growl of rage, the old she-bear fell upon all-fours, and hastened directly to the rescue of her surviving cubs. The course of the brute was also toward Leon, who was unable to get a chance at a fair aim with his rifle, so quick were the movements of the bear.

Springing to one side, to avoid the charge of the maddened monster, he yelled to Arline:

"Run! Run for your life! Climb upon a boulder! I will save you, or lose my own life!"

From the instant that the bear had turned about and left her, the fearful spell having been broken by the cry of the cubs, Arline's gaze became fixed upon the handsome and graceful youth, as the latter leaped nimbly away from the terrible jaws, giving at the same time his yells of warning and direction.

"Father in Heaven, I thank Thee! Bless, oh, bless and help my brave preserver!"

These were the first words, that in earnest, soul-felt and prayerful accents, fell from the but now fear-palsied tongue of Arline Andrews, as she recovered herself, and strove to obey the stranger youth, flying over the rough stones to gain the larger rocks and boulders at the base of the opposite side of the gulch.

But, although her way was rough and hazardous, the jagged rocks tearing her shoes and even her feet and ankles, yet she cast frequent glances over her shoulders, filled with torturing concern in regard to the safety of the daring youth, who had arrived so opportunely upon the scene, when her life hung by a hair—when death hung upon a single breath—thus saving her life for the time, but perhaps to be himself torn in pieces; sacrificed for no good, as the maddened beast would then attack and devour her. This, she felt, must be the end of it; for she knew that she was unable to climb to a place of safety, as the youth had directed her.

Even could she accomplish this, what a terrible fate would still be hers.

There would be no one to guide, or to assist her.

Poor Jim and this young stranger both dead, she would be alone in that awful mountain gorge, up the sides of which it was impossible for her to climb. Without a horse, or food, or human aid, far from the haunts of men, where none of the hunting party would think of searching; and with howling, savage beasts around her ark of safety, even should she get beyond their reach. This was the near, and only future.

And all this flashed instantaneously through the mind of poor Arline, as she stumbled along over the rock-strewn path. Then she saw, as she gazed backward with bated breath, that the monster bear had reached her cubs, and, finding but one of them slain, as before, had again whirled about, and was looking with mad fury toward her as she fled; the movement of the beast defeating the purpose of Leon, who was striving to get an aim at a point where a bullet would cause a mortal wound.

Upon detecting the flight of Arline, its expected prey, the old bear at once sprung in chase, the motionless form of Leon being unnoticed.

The young girl, upon detecting the return of the monster, uttered wild shrieks of terror, and again became powerless. Thus she stood, rigid and ghastly, in her tracks, and facing the fast approaching beast.

With one loud yell, Leon bounded headlong to cut off the bear from its intended victim; reaching the side of the paralyzed maiden just as the terrible brute had reared for the fatal embrace, its huge paws outstretched as before.

Thrusting his rifle against the side of the monster, just clear of the shoulder blade, Leon Lisle pulled the trigger.

A far-sounding report awoke the echoes of the gulch, followed by a roar that was most horrible. With this was blended a piercing shriek, and then a blow that caused a tearing sound.

Then all was silent, except the whining growls of the surviving cubs, and the scratching of their claws upon the rough rocks, as they made their way to the side of their mother—the monster she-bear, the quivering carcass of which lay upon the stones, a gaping hole in her side from which the blood welled in torrents.

One paw of the huge beast lay upon the breast of Leon Lisle, from which both buckskin and shirt had been torn in rags, revealing the flesh all scratched and gore-stained.

There lay the huge bear in the last throes of death, its slayer, the brave youth, silent, senseless and bleeding upon the rough rocks; the same terrible paw, that had annihilated poor Jumbo Jim, lying upon his lacerated breast.

And there, just beyond him, outstretched upon the rocks, lay the fair and golden-haired maiden, more like a corpse than one in whose heart the life-blood lingered, although its circulation was now stagnated through non-action of the brain.

It was a fearful, a horrible sight! There, in that wild and rock-bound gorge, the rough walls of which towered skyward.

A dead and mangled negro, of giant form, lying by the carcasses of a monster bear and cub.

And near to them a noble, handsome youth, and an angelic maiden—mere boy and girl—both seemingly as dead.

This, gentle reader, was the terrible scene in that far-away wild gorge of the Blue Ridge. Naught was within view that had motion or power to break the silence of the solitude, the deathlike silence, except a pair of snarling young bears, now moaning and scratching as they climbed over and around their slaughtered dam.

So it remained for some length of time, until the cubs wandered, with growl and whine, from the fast-chilling carcass, and began to lap their tongues and thrust their cold noses upon the face of poor Arline. This had the effect of reviving her; and she opened her eyes in a bewildered manner, which was quickly changed to terror, as she saw the young beasts and felt their breath and their claws touching her.

Then the near past flashed upon her mind with all its dangers and horrors.

Springing to her feet and casting the cubs from her, Arline stood gazing upon the scene before her, believing that she was alone in that gloomy and isolated mountain gulch—alone with the dead—with those upon whom she had been the direct means of bringing death.

It was enough, even without the thoughts it gave birth to, to drive one to almost hopeless despair; and it was no wonder that, as the thoughts flashed upon Arline's mind, she had frequently heard her father say that the he-bear may be expected to appear, where its mate and young cubs are seen, at any time—it was not any wonder that this thought, coupled with the scene before her, caused the poor girl to shriek aloud in mortal anguish and terror.

Again she sunk senseless upon the jagged rocks by the side of Leon; and as she did so, the youth suddenly arose to a sitting posture, but completely dazed for the time being.

Clasping the soft and delicate hand of the maiden as soon as he could collect his scattered senses, he placed his other hand upon her heart, and to his joy detected a faint pulsation.

Knowing that she would soon revive, he placed her gently again in as easy a position as was possible; but, just then a fierce series of growls and snorts, and a clattering of iron-shod hoofs upon hard rock sounded from the adamant shelf up the east side of the gulch.

These were followed by a shriek that was almost human, and which Leon knew proceeded from his horse. Springing to his feet, and still clasping Arline, the youth gazed, horror-stricken and with deep concern, up the gulch side.

Just then Arline recovered her senses, and gazed up into the face of her youthful preserver.

But, as she began in broken sentences to express what she felt, the eyes of the youth became fixed, glossy and staring, upon the shelf above them. He clutched the more tightly, and she, following his gaze with apprehensive terror, dreaded more horrors to come.

And another horrible sight it was that met their view. This was naught else than another monster bear—undoubtedly the mate to the beast that Leon had slain; tearing and crunching with teeth and claws, and with low growls and horrid sounds, upon the neck and body of the horse of Leon Lisle.

Both animals fell, in their struggles, over the brink of the rocky shelf, crashing down upon the tops of the pines.

Then bracing himself, Leon, with a groan at the sad fate of his steed, but spurred to action by the belief that the huge bear had not been seriously injured, bore Arline over the rocks, soon reaching a huge boulder. Up the rough side of this he assisted the fair girl, and fast followed her.

Upon reaching the top of the immense rock, Leon gazed around, drew his revolver, and passing the weapon to Arline, he hastened down again without a word; soon returning to his trembling and affrighted charge, with his rifle.

This he loaded, saying:

"Now, my little friend, we are safe for the present; but my poor horse is being devoured by the Big Bear of Blue Ridge!"

CHAPTER III.

GREEK MEETS GREEK.

THE sounds, which our young friends could now plainly hear below them, verified the words of Leon, proving conclusively that his sure-footed horse, that had borne him along many dangerous mountain paths, was being devoured by the Big Bear of Blue Ridge.

The words of the youth seemed to intimate that this particular beast was not unknown to him.

No sooner, however, had he reloaded his rifle, than Arline, trembling in every limb, nestled closer to her youthful preserver; and, in words, the earnestness of which betrayed her still fearful apprehensions, asked:

"Tell me, tell me truly, are we safe from that terrible beast?"

Except for the strong regret and grief occasioned by the horrible death of his favorite four-footed companion, the features and voice of Leon would have been firm, clear, and natural; for not the slightest anxiety, fear or lack of self-possession was manifested when he replied:

"We are perfectly safe here, I can assure you; and for two reasons. First, the bear will gorge himself with the flesh of my poor horse, which will render the brute less furious at sight of us, when it comes from cover; and, secondly, I do not think it possible for the beast to climb up this boulder.

"I only wish it would, for I am determined to avenge poor Surefoot's death."

"Oh, for my sake, do not shoot again. If you wound the bear, it will be more dangerous, and will not go away."

Thus pleaded Arline.

"I do not wish to cause you any further fright; but, I will tell you truly, that, when the brute discovers its dead mate, it will be furious, and will scent us, even if we secrete ourselves.

"It will not leave the vicinity to-day, or even during the coming night. Of this I am confident. Consequently, we are prisoners in this gulch; and on this rock, at that.

"But, in the name of wonder, how came you in this lonely spot, and where is your home?"

Arline briefly related the circumstances in connection with the grand hunting and camping-party, that had been organized by her father; why he had thus collected his friends and neighbors together, and the location, as far as she could determine of the encampment.

She also told of her ride up the base of the range to view the country, under the guardianship of Jumbo Jim; and explained in every detail, the occurrences previous to the arrival of her strange companion.

When Arline mentioned the name of the father, and her own Leon gave a sudden start, and a troubled expression overspread his handsome face, but this was unnoticed by the beautiful girl, who, as the horrible sounds from the pine thicket became, at times, more noticeable, hesitated in her narration, trembling, shuddering, and clinging more closely to her youthful preserver, who, she truly believed, was the only link that bound her to earth.

"And why did the negro waste his bullet on the cub?" asked Leon after the young girl had explained all. "He ought to have known that the old bear was near at hand and would be very dangerous when she discovered the death of her young one."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Arline, in a voice that was full of grief and self-condemnation; "I suppose—indeed, I know—it was all my fault. The cub came out of the pines and startled my pony, which had been several times before frightened since we came into the gulch."

"I presume that Gypsy scented the bears, and I was foolish enough to urge him on. I shall never forget this dreadful day, I am sure. How wicked I have been!

"I have caused poor Jumbo Jim to lose his life, and you have lost your fine horse; besides all that I am so frightened that I fear I shall be ill, thus delaying poor papa from starting for Texas; that is, if we are so fortunate as to ever escape from this horrid place."

"Don't fret in regard to the poor darky and my horse. All that can't be helped now; and besides, I have other horses."

"You ought to be very thankful that you have escaped with your life. As for myself, I would not have missed the chance of meeting with you for a hundred horses."

"I'll tell you what I think. I believe that you and I were fated to meet in this way; but I most sincerely trust that our future meetings may not be under such unfavorable and dangerous circumstances."

"We must, and will, be strong and loving friends forever, and we must allow nothing to mar our friendship. I am really grieved at the death of poor Jim, however. Had I arrived sooner, I might have saved him."

"I was on the trail of this same Big Bear of the Blue Ridge that is now feasting on the carcass of my horse, and it was providential that I struck the 'sign,' or I fear you would have lost your life. It is dreadful to think of."

"Little Arline, fate led you up that gorge. Let us believe that all is for the best, notwithstanding poor Jumbo Jim lost his life. He can only have suffered for a few moments."

Arline covered her face with her hands and shuddered. Then she threw off her grief and depression, as much as was possible, and replied:

"Oh, please do not speak of poor Jim again! What a horrible day it has been! What will poor papa think? He will go distracted I know, and they will not know where to search for me. Please tell me what your name is and where you live."

"I shall never forget you. When my father takes me to Texas, it will not remove the very slightest of the impressions made this day."

"Perhaps," said the youth, after a pause, "it may be best that I withhold my name until some future time. I am not ashamed of it, but there have been occurrences in the past that have occasioned a strong enmity between your family and mine."

"You and I, however, are not responsible for the ill-feeling that exists between our parents, yet they, on either side, would rather see us dead than intimate friends. This is unjust, of course, but it is nevertheless true."

"You are going, you say, to Texas; and I have vowed in my mind that I will speed over the prairies of the Lone Star State. I believe the day will come when we shall meet again. I cannot explain why I think so, but I am most firmly convinced of it."

The young girl listened to this speech, in mingled wonder, sadness, and pleasure.

"I am greatly puzzled at your words," she at length said. "If there is a mystery between our families—an enmity, you say—we must banish it. It is not right that we should suffer for any misunderstanding, or fancied wrong, between our parents. I hope that you will go to Texas also, and that we may often meet. But do tell me your name."

"I cannot deny your repeated request, Arline. My name is Leon Lisle, and, upon second thought, I am quite confident that my family name has never been mentioned to you by your father. Is it not new to you?"

"I do not remember having heard it," was her answer; "but I like the name, very much."

"Thanks," said Leon; "but, to explain further: my home is quite two days' ride north from here; my father is a wealthy planter, and I have never mingled much with the world; having been educated entirely by private tutors."

"I am an enthusiastic admirer of Nature, excessively fond of fishing and hunting, and hence my presence in these mountains. Like many an experienced hunter, I have long sought to kill the famous Big Bear, whose mate I am so proud to have slain. This has been the great object of my mountain wanderings for the past two years."

"But I have had, too, a great desire to roam the plains of the great Southwest; Texas being the El Dorado of my dreams. And when you, Arline, are within the boundaries of the Lone Star State, it will become a thousand times dearer to me than its romantic history has already made it."

"And now, hear me! Unless prevented by some most improbable and unforeseen circumstances, I promise you that I will ere long gallop over the glorious Texan prairies."

"I must first complete my studies; but you will then be a grown young lady, less social, and more reserved; and Leon Lisle will have passed from your memory. No; I cannot hope that you will then gallop by my side."

"Never," said the young girl solemnly, "will I forget this day, or you. I shall always remember that you saved my life at the risk of your own; and none shall ever usurp your place in my heart!"

It was a strange time and place. They could scarcely be called lovers, and yet, as it was, they thus exchanged hopes, and thoughts, and sentiments.

But it is a matter of fact world, and romantic though they might feel, both became not only very hungry, but began to suffer greatly from thirst; the sun having now passed the meridian, and blazing down into the gulch upon their unprotected heads. For Leon to leave the rock would be to court death, for well he knew that the huge bear was liable to emerge from the pines at any moment.

Not only this, but he knew that some of the most noted hunters had striven in vain to slay the monarch of the mountains, many bullets having at various times been shot into the beast without any serious results. He felt, therefore, that it would be next to impossible for him to kill the bear; even were he to empty every chamber of his revolver and his rifle, if the bullets did not penetrate either heart or brain, they would only serve to madden him.

Besides this, no good could be accomplished, except by dragging the dead cub upon the boulder; and then, its flesh could not be cr—, unless he ran further risks by gathering fuel.

Arline bore up bravely and uncomplainingly, but Leon knew that she suffered greatly—more, indeed, than he did, as he was used to privation.

This greatly worried the youth, and he became extremely anxious when he thought of the long night which they must pass on the rock.

The two cubs had disappeared while he and his fair companion had been conversing, and this fact, upon reflection, caused Leon great relief and hope. He knew that the cubs would only have left the body of their mother to join the big bear in the thicket.

The old he-bear had not discovered the carcass of his mate or the dead cub, so intent had the brute been in satisfying its hunger upon its prey. But when it did, and then scented them out, undoubtedly the monster would endeavor to climb the boulder.

At all events, it was certain that the bear would keep watch and guard over its mate and the cubs perhaps for days, its presence being assured from the fact that the horse would appease its appetite for some time.

The prospect was far from flattering, and Leon began to inspect the side of the gulch near them; not having previously thought of escape in that direction. To his great joy, he saw that the wall was much broken, and scarred

by cracks and fissures. It began to appear more inviting. The outlook was a little brighter.

Quickly casting his rifle-strap over his shoulder, the youth sprang erect, with a cry of relief and pleasure, saying:

"Come, Arline! I believe I now see a way of escape; but we must proceed at once, and in great haste, for the bear may emerge from the pines at any moment. Do not speak, but watch my movements!"

"Cheer up! We can, at all events, reach a place that will be safer and more comfortable. We will hope for the best."

Springing down the boulder-side, he assisted Arline to descend; and then guided her over the rough rocks, toward the wall of the gulch. In a few moments the maiden was as high up the wall as the top of the rock they had left; and thus, on she went, until more than halfway up to the scrub cedars that marked and fringed the shelf.

Leon stood beneath, ready to catch her if she fell, but casting frequent glances behind him, in the direction of the pines, on the opposite side of the gulch-bed.

Thus were they situated, when a deep and furious growl, mingled with a crashing of branches, chilled Arline's blood, and prevented her from proceeding upward.

"Cling closer!" cried the youth. "I'll soon be with you. To fall is death to both of us!"

As Leon thus spoke, the bear, a hideous animal, of monstrous size, with blazing eyes, gleaming teeth, and blood-smeared head and paws, waddled from the pines. On the beast came, snuffing the air, its growls growing deeper and more furious, as it perceived its dead mate and cub, and detected the presence of its human foes in the mountain gorge.

The horrible monster proceeded across the bed of the gulch, directly toward our young friends. Leon Lisle clutched his rifle, cocked it, and stood, uncertain what to do.

He was, indeed, in a most torturing state of mind. He recalled the fainting fit of his fair companion, occasioned by her previous terror; and he feared that she would now lose her senses, and fall from the wall of the gulch.

Almost certain death to them both would be the consequence, should this happen.

Leon trembled at the possibilities of the moment, but not on his own account.

That the angelic maiden whom he had once saved, and whom he now felt he loved as his own life, should be torn in pieces by this monster of the mountains, was too horrible to think of. It congealed the very blood in his veins.

Ghastly as a corpse, still clinging to the rough rocks with the strength of desperation, her eyes fixed in a horrified stare on the huge brute that waddled toward Leon—thus hung Arline Andrews, her form swinging from side to side.

Leon Lisle did not look upward. He dared not even speak.

Thus he stood, braced against the wall, and grasping his ready rifle as in a vise; his teeth set, and his eyes fixed upon his advancing foe.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BIG BEAR OF THE BLUE RIDGE.

It was a most critical moment in the lives of Leon Lisle and Arline Andrews. Nearer to death, judging from appearances, were they now than ever before.

The huge he-bear was much more difficult to kill than his mate had been, and was now advancing straight upon Leon, offering no chance for him to shoot a bullet into its heart, and to aim at its head, the ball would, nine times out of ten, glance off the thick, receding skull.

There seemed little hope for the youth, and still less for the maiden; for, should she fall, there was danger of her fracturing her limbs on the jagged rocks below, as Leon's attention was now given to the bear, and he could not catch Arline, or break her fall.

The poor girl might, at any instant, lose her strength and fall, senseless and maimed, and at the mercy of the terrible beast.

From the fact that she had fainted on the previous occasion, and become incapable of speech or motion, there was every danger, situated as she was, that such would be the case.

Certainly no youth was ever placed in a more perilous position personally, or had his mind more tortured in regard to the safety of a loved one at the same time than was Leon Lisle; and, as the thoughts and reasonings that have been recorded flashed like lightning through his mind he resolved upon instant and decisive action. This was contrary to his previously formed plan, but Arline must be saved at all hazards.

His life must not, now, be taken into consideration. All depended upon prompt action.

This decision was instantly formed, and as instantly acted upon. "When the beast was within ten feet of the courageous youth, he had slung his rifle over his shoulder, and was clutching at the rough wall beneath Arline."

He dared not trust himself to speak. The furious howl of the enraged brute was sounding directly behind him. He shot one glance upward.

Arline remained in the same position.

Leon observed that her form was swaying,

and he saw the terror that was imprinted on her death-like face, while her eyes were fastened upon the hideous animal below.

That she was on the point of falling, he knew; and he struggled up the wall, tearing his hands fearfully, and in danger himself of falling backward, into the very jaws of the monster. But haste was imperative.

A continuous growling, and scratching of claws upon the rocks, chilled his blood, and made him hasten on, until he was directly below Arline. His fingers clutched the very seam in the rock wall within which her feet were thrust. Then a thought struck him.

He would speak the only words that, he felt, would arouse her to action.

He would cause her to lose all thought of herself, in her anxiety for his safety.

"For God's sake!" he cried; "for your own sake—for my sake, Arline, climb up, and quickly! Do you not see that I am unable to ascend higher until you proceed further?"

"The bear will tear me from my hold, and devour me; and then you are lost. Call all your strength of body and will to the front, and climb—for Heaven's sake, climb!"

The young man's terror was not all counterfeited.

"Don't look down, but up," he pleaded again; "and climb, or I am lost!"

As he spoke, he realized that the growling monster was rearing upon its haunches, its claws scratching the gulch wall just below him; and soon, did he not advance, to be thrust into his limbs, thus tearing him from his hold.

He could easily have passed Arline, and been safe; but he knew that he could not retain his hold, and support her fainting form at the same time. Both must, in such a case, fall, and meet their terrible fate.

His only hope depended on the effect that his words produced; and, as he had hoped, those words proved effectual. All thought of her own peril was crushed by her anxiety for Leon, and she obeyed his instructions to the letter; climbing quickly, and with a skill that astonished the youth who witnessed it.

Had there been time for the one thought of what her position would be, in the event of her preserver being torn from the wall by the bear—had not this thought been crowded back, by the consciousness that it was in her power to prevent such a terrible disaster, Arline would, doubtless, have become incapable of sense or motion, and our story would have ended here.

But, in a minute more, Leon had the joy and satisfaction of seeing the maiden seated on the edge of the rocky shelf, and clutching in each hand a cedar branch, for support.

Arline was safe, for the present.

The youth now turned, and gazed down at the hideous, blood-smear'd brute, that, with deep growls, and distended jaws, strove to reach him.

The sight of the monster maddened Leon greatly.

He determined that the Big Bear of the Blue Ridge should fall by his hand.

With one hand, he unslung his rifle, cocked the weapon, and pointed the muzzle down; lowering the barrel directly into the open mouth of the bear, and pulling the trigger.

With a horrible howl, the beast fell to the bed of the gulch, rolling, kicking, and growling in its agony; but Leon did not pause to investigate the effect of his shot. He quickly reslung his rifle, and the next moment was seated on the rocky shelf beside Arline Andrews.

"Thank Heaven! You are safe, Leon," exclaimed the girl, thankfully and earnestly. "I dared not hope that we should escape with life. I had not the remotest hope that I would be able to reach this portion of the gulch wall.

"I came near losing my hold several times. But, oh! I am so rejoiced that you have given that dreadful beast its death-wound."

"This has been the most eventful day of my life," said our young friend. "I have not only slain the dreaded monster of the mountains, and its mate, but—"

His face flushed, and he hesitated to complete his speech, as he looked meaningly at his fair companion.

"You mean," she said, "that you have, in addition to that, saved the only child of a fond father from a horrible death; and that, at the risk of your own, many times over."

"I have heard, often, of this Big Bear of the Blue Ridge, that has devoured many human beings, as well as horses and cattle. Is this really that fearful monster?"

"Beyond a doubt," was the reply. "I have often trailed the huge brute, and it has been, for two years, the one grand object of my hunting-trips, to slay him. The skins of the pair will be trophies indeed. But this victory is the least thing that causes me pride to-day."

"What I was about to say, but just now, was this: the Fates have, this day, and in a most strange manner, led me on to the gaining of your regard and friendship. This has given me hopes and happiness that I had not hitherto dreamed of."

"But now the thought of your early departure for Texas, with the possibility that events

may occur that will prevent our meeting in the future, comes up to cloud it. Should we never meet again, I shall be indeed most desolate."

"But away with such thoughts and forebodings! I have vowed that I will follow you, Arline, and nothing shall stand between me and that vow!"

"Do not intimate that it is possible we may never again see each other," said Arline, earnestly. "You must not, should not, talk so. You have risked your life to save mine, and I cannot bear to think of life again separate from yours. It is little I can ever do in return for what you have done for me, but as long as my life lasts, your slightest wish shall be my law. Not even my father shall ever come between us."

"God bless you, Arline!" said the youth. "True as the needle to the pole will I be to you, whether present or absent; and the only source from which I fear enmity and war against our love is from your father."

"Why, Leon, how can you say so? You do not know papa. When he knows that you have saved his daughter's life, when he knows your brave and noble character, what objections can he have? What can he say against you?"

"Nothing in strict justice, Arline; but this happens to be a most unjust world."

"The day will come, I trust, when I can explain all to you; and should you mention my name to your father, you would see his face contort with rage and hatred. You would hear him rave and storm, and forbid your ever daring to meet or speak with a Lisle."

"But we will not mar our present pleasure in each other's company by speaking of the past, which I am not at liberty to enter more fully upon. Promise me, Arline, that you will not mention my name to your father or to any others. Do this, and my life shall be devoted to you and to the removal, as far as lies in my power, of the hatred that exists between our parents."

"It shall not sever us, however, for we are not responsible for the acts of others."

During this speech the young girl gazed into his face with an expression of amazement, so filled was she with wonder at his words. She would, no doubt, have insisted upon an explanation had there not, at that moment, sounded from down the gulch the loud clatter of many hoofs, which appeared to be approaching the point where sat the youthful pair.

"If you really care for me, Arline, do not mention the name of him to whom you are indebted for your rescue from the bears."

"Your father is now coming in search of you. Tell him only that a stranger slew the beasts, and has gone for assistance and to procure a horse for you."

"And now, good-by! May God bless you. We shall soon meet, rest assured. Again, farewell!"

Pressing hasty kisses upon the maiden's cheek and brow, Leon Lisle dashed within the cedars, and hastened along the rocky shelf, leaving Arline speechless and astonished, being overcome with grief at his unaccountable behavior, and his, as she thought, uncalled for departure.

The next moment, a cavalcade, led by the anxious and agonized Colonel Andrews, galloped up to the spot where lay the mangled corpse of poor Jumbo Jim, and the carcasses of the she-bear and her cub.

A wail of soul-drawn anguish burst from the lips of the planter. But this was followed by an instant outcry of as intense joy and relief; for a wild shout came from several horsemen in the party, and following the direction of their gaze, the colonel saw a most welcome sight.

Arline, his loved daughter, was sitting, and apparently uninjured, upon a rocky shelf, on the opposite wall of the gulch. Her arms were stretched toward him, lovingly and pleadingly; but she was pale as a corpse, and evidently incapable of speech, or action in the way of a descent from her perilous position.

The scene was most impressive to all. The dead and mutilated negro, and the two slain bears, so monstrous in size, both shot, but by whom?

That Arline had escaped a terrible death—that she had been preserved by some one, at the imminent risk of his own life, and through great skill and daring bravery—all this was evident; but where was the victor in the fight?

Where was he, to whom all owed praise and adulation?

Not a human being was within view, outside of their own party, except the planter's daughter, sitting, as we have described, on the shelf of the gulch wall.

All sat upon their horses, completely dumfounded for the moment by the strange and inexplicable scene. Colonel Andrews, himself, was unable to move a muscle, or speak a word.

CHAPTER V.

FOUND AND LOST.

THE scene that was presented before the astonished and horrified cavalcade of planters at the bend in the gulch was, as the reader is

aware, impressive and terrible. The gigantic monarch of the mountains lay, a huge black mass, at the foot of the wall, above which sat Arline Andrews.

There was much less of pleasure and relief at the appearance of her father and his guests than she herself had thought possible. She would much rather have returned to camp under guard and guidance of the youth who had, in so short a time, become dearer to her than all else on earth.

But there was now no opportunity to recall Leon Lisle, for he was doubtless far away; and she could not refuse to grant every request that he had made, although she was much puzzled as to how she should explain everything that had passed to her father.

Only for one brief minute did the hunters sit their horses, in amazement at the strange and terrible spectacle before them, suggestive as it was of a most fearful conflict between man and brute, and also of the great dangers that had been gone through by the young girl, now high up on that rocky shelf, and for whom they had been in search with no other expectation than that they should find her mangled remains. This they had been led to fear, since her riderless pony had galloped into the camp.

The whining, and breaking through the pine branches of the two cubs broke the spell that held the observers, and instantly a half-dozen rifles exploded as one in a terrific report, like the discharge of a six-pound cannon, both the young bears rolling over lifeless.

Then, as if at word of command, every planter swung himself from his saddle, and a confused murmur of voices filled the gulch. All were now intent only upon relieving Arline from her dangerous position, and gaining from her an explanation of her strange adventures, which they knew must have been not only dangerous, but wonderful.

With a wild cry of joy, Colonel Andrews sprung to the bed of the gulch at the very moment that the thunderous report of the rifles rung and echoed from cliff and crag overhead, and without a thought of securing his horse, he sprang over the rocks toward the base of the adamantine wall where lay the carcass of the monster bear, and above which sat his daughter, who seemed to be in danger of falling at any moment.

All his attention was, from necessity, forced to the selection of footholds here and there, between or upon the rough rocks; but when the colonel reached the dead bear he halted, gazing upward at his daughter, his features showing the deep concern that was his.

Thus he stood for a moment, panting with exertion.

He realized that his child was in most deadly peril. Her gaze was downward into his face, but her eyes were filled with a strange and unnatural expression. She was pallid as death itself, and her form swayed back and forth, being sustained only by her clutch at the branches of the cedars near her.

To fall from that giddy perch would certainly either maim her for life or kill her outright, did she not strike upon the yielding carcass of the bear, and her agonized father realized not only this, but that were she suddenly excited in any manner, she would undoubtedly lose her grasp upon the branches and shoot headlong downward upon the jagged rocks.

The agony of that moment was most terrible. Colonel Andrews gasped for breath, and raised his hands in caution as he turned toward his friends, who approached hastily, his manner and the expression of his face showing them the true state of affairs.

Every man stood in his tracks, almost paralyzed with agonizing apprehension, each and every one at a loss what to do. All feared to make a movement, or utter a word, lest the maiden should be startled and fall, a mangled corpse, before them.

This was but for an instant, but it seemed an age to all whose eyes were fixed upon Arline.

As they gazed they saw a human hand appear beneath each of her arm-pits, and slowly she was dragged within the branches of the cedars.

A shriek most piercing came from her pallid lips as the strange hands touched her form. Then limp and apparently lifeless she slowly disappeared within the green screen beyond the edge of the shelf.

"Oh, my God! I thank thee!"

These words burst from the old colonel in the fervency of his relief and joy, and other like ejaculations came on all sides from the planters, as if each one of them had been suddenly relieved from a personal danger or painful torture.

Such indeed, it had been to them, for no one, unless his heart was devoid of feeling, could have looked upon that lovely girl in such peril, weakness and helplessness without feeling for her the greatest anxiety and concern.

"Bring a rope! For Heaven's sake, a rope!"

Thus yelled Colonel Andrews as he began to climb frantically up the rough wall, fast followed by a number of his friends, while others ran to secure the neck-ropes of their horses.

The anxious father reached the edge of the

rock wall, at the very point where Arline had so recently been seated, then crawled upon the shelf, and, clutching the cedar branches, tore away the narrow fringe of dwarf trees, bursting out upon another ledge of rock some four feet wide.

Winding along up and down the wall of the gulf this shelf extended, at some places growing much narrower, the border of stunted cedars on its edge being some six feet in height.

As the colonel emerged from the little thicket, in excitement and expectant joy, he came to a halt abruptly, grasping at the cedars for support. His form reeled and trembled as he shot searching glances along the ledge, both up and down the gulch wall.

Thus he stood in amazement and anguish.

And well he might, for Arline, his golden-haired darling, his only child, was not to be seen!

After all that she had escaped, after all that she had suffered, now, just when his own great anxiety had been removed, she had vanished, and her unknown rescuer as well.

"Oh, God! My child, my child! Give me back my darling—my little Arline!"

Thus trembling and completely overcome by this latest calamity, his neighbors found him. Not knowing what to think or to do, they stood around him, each gazing at the others in silence.

"Search the cedars to the north and south along the shelf!" at length cried out one of the planters, in a voice that betrayed his emotion.

"What, in the fiend's name, does this mean? The mystery thickens. Your daughter, colonel, was rescued as we thought by a friend. I believed him to be the man who killed those bears; but it seems that whoever he was he has spirited Arline away.

"But brace up, Andrews! Arline shall be rescued. We'll hunt the villain. Now that I think of what has passed, there seems to be no doubt in regard to the character of the man who drew her from her dangerous position just now. You all noticed that he showed only his hands!"

"Gentlemen, the man who fears to be seen when he seems to be doing a most commendable action is not doing it for any good.

"The outlaws of Blue Ridge are mixed up in this mysterious affair. Colonel Andrews, be a man! Throw off all weakness, and assist us in the recovery of your daughter, for find her we shall!"

"Well, gents,"—to those who now came up from their search of the cedars—"have you made any discovery?"

"Not a trace or sign of the girl, Captain Gordon," answered several of the planters, in chorus.

All were very much incensed and grieved at the unexpected turn affairs had taken. They had not, however, the slightest doubt of finding the maiden safe, but probably somewhere in an unconscious condition.

They also supposed, as a matter of course, that her preserver, whoever he was, would be with her.

The entire party were, notwithstanding, greatly puzzled.

The hard rock betrayed no trail, and none of them knew anything of the mountain paths in that vicinity.

Many were the hiding-places, as they knew, secure from discovery, within the radius of a mile.

All this each realized within the silent minute, after the report of the searchers had been given.

Then came yells from the gulch-bed, from some of the party, who had been left with the animals and to inspect the ground around the bend.

The planters on the shelf broke through the cedars, and standing on the verge of the ledge gazed down into the gulch, wondering what new discovery had been made, and prepared for almost anything.

"Well, gents, what news down there?" inquired Captain Gordon.

"We have found the carcass of a horse, torn and mangled by the bears, in the pines at the base of the east wall where the cubs were," was the reply.

"The horse is fully equipped, and its bones seem to have been broken by a fall from the shelf.

"Have you found Miss Andrews? And if so, why do you not lower her down? Is she not able to be removed?"

"Miss Andrews has disappeared, leaving no trace. She has, undoubtedly, been kidnapped by outlaws. Do any of you know the mountains hereabouts?"

All were completely astounded at this intelligence; but they asserted, after a brief conference, that none present knew anything about that wild region.

Colonel Andrews staggered to the very edge of the shelf, catching at a cedar branch for support; and heard, as in a dream, the reports made by those below him in the gulch.

As the planters acknowledged their ignorance in regard to the mountain-paths one of their

number, who had been examining the carcass of the horse, came out from the pines, and yelled:

"I've found out who the horse belonged to! I mean, I know who rode the animal."

"Well, who was it?" called out Gordon.

All listened intently.

"Leon Lisle, from up-country!"

Instantly Colonel Andrews became a changed man.

As he heard these words, his eyes blazed with a furious resolve, and the most vengeful hatred. He raised his clinched hands upward, and muttered an oath of vengeance; his words being overheard by his nearest neighbor.

A rope was cast off from below, the end secured to a tree, and all proceeded down the wall to the gulch-bed, agreeably to the suggestion of Captain Gordon. The latter now said:

"Gentlemen, we must return to camp. Every man in our party must equip, and we will search the mountains in a systematic manner.

"We are throwing away time here, for guides will have to be engaged. Should we scatter, and begin our search now, many would get lost, or might be killed by falling from some cliff.

"If Arline is in Leon Lisle's hands, she is safe. That boy is a gentleman, though his conduct in this is strange and suspicious, to say the least.

"The whole matter is, I acknowledge, too deep for me. It is a most mysterious case, and I am confident we will find it to the end of the chapter.

"If I mistake not greatly, there is more than the blood of bears, and of Jumbo Jim, to be spilt!"

"Blood, did you say, Captain Gordon?" exclaimed the old man. "Yes, you are right! Blood shall flow! Woe be to the man who has stolen my child! Leon Lisle shall die the death of a dog! I shall laugh at his dying gasps, and his death-rattle will be sweet music to my ears!"

"Wait until you know that he has injured you, or yours, Anthony Andrews!" advised Gordon.

"He is not the youth to harm the hair of any one's head, and time will prove what I say."

Colonel Andrews ground his teeth in fury, and sprung into his saddle, galloping down the gulch; followed by his friends, all of whom were determined that they would search night and day, until Arline was found, and these mysteries cleared up.

An hour afterward, two-score of mounted planters, with competent guides—the colonel and Gordon in the lead—started from the camp, to search for Arline among the mountains.

Colonel Andrews spoke to no one, noticed no one; his mind was a whirlpool of mad thoughts, that surged through his brain.

He was fully resolved that Leon Lisle should die!

CHAPTER VI.

THE LONE RIDER.

WHEN Leon Lisle heard the horsemen coming up the gulch, and decided that they were the father and friends of Arline, he bade the latter farewell, and dashing away, secreted himself, and peered from the branches, witnessing their arrival.

Leon knew that they had discovered Arline on the verge of the shelf, and feeling that she was now safe, he stole from his covert to the clear portion of the ledge, and proceeded along the same for some distance; until he, by inspection, ascertained that it was impossible for him to descend to the gulch-bed, as the shelf had gradually wound upward, along the rocky wall, the side of the gorge below having become more even, and affording no footing.

He had been forced to leave his saddle and bridle upon his dead horse; but he had no intention of abandoning them, as he valued them highly.

He had, upon leaving Arline, intended to advance north, descend into the gulch, and gain the shelf on the opposite side; the same upon which he had ridden to the vicinity of the scene of the conflict with the bears, and the rescue of Arline.

Then, when the planters had departed, he could not only regain his equipments, but secure the trophies of his prowess, the skins of the monster bears.

This would occupy some time, for he would be obliged to "cache" the skins, on account of the wolves, until he could return with another horse to convey them to his home.

The brain of the young man was filled with an intoxicating whirl of most joyous thoughts, all centering upon the lovely girl whom he had saved from a horrible fate, and to whose rescue he felt that he had been providentially directed.

He was confident that, henceforth through life, the paths of this maiden would be his, and her hopes his hopes—that their lives were des-

tinued to be linked together at no far distant day; and his firm belief in this made him almost jubilant.

Leon well knew that he would be forced to surmount many difficulties to gain the end in view, but all this marred few of the heavenly thoughts that now ruled him—thoughts born of "Love's young Dream."

Finding that it was impossible for him to descend to the floor of the gorge, and there carry out his pre-arranged plans, he proceeded to inspect the wall above, and soon, to his relief, he reached a point from which he could scale the same to the top of a lower portion of the gulch wall, which was here somewhat overgrown with trees.

By passing along the mountain-side in this way, he could gain a view of the planters, and of Arline as well—he remaining unseen. Then, upon the departure of the cavalcade, he could descend at his leisure, and secure his property.

Immediately he scaled the gulch wall—a hazardous feat to any one who was unaccustomed to mountain-climbing—and in a short time found himself directly over the bend in the gulch, the point of interest.

Lying at full length along the rock, on the very verge of the height, where a small portion of rock had fallen from the edge of the cliff, Leon placed his head in the cavity, face downward, and was thus enabled to view the scene a hundred feet below, without the possibility of being discovered.

He had gained this position at the very moment that Colonel Andrews stood by the carcass of the monster bear, gazing upward, appalled and agonized at the perilous position of his daughter.

At that instant, to the utter astonishment of Leon, he perceived the figure of a man half bent, stealing toward Arline, but concealed from her and from the party below by the border of stunted cedars.

This stranger was on the clear portion of the rocky shelf, on the edge of which sat the maiden.

Upon reaching a point directly behind Arline the man darted into the cedars; but Leon could see that he did not reveal himself to the planters or to the young girl herself. In fact, the youth could no longer himself see the stranger; but he felt convinced that he was at work in a stealthy manner.

Of this he was soon assured, for he heard Arline shriek, and saw her immediately afterward drawn into the ribbon of dwarf cedars.

The next moment the stranger, with Arline in his arms, now limp and senseless as Leon could easily determine, emerged from the thicket and hastened along the rock shelf by the way that he had come, being hidden from view by the winding walls.

To say that Leon Lisle was surprised, would but faintly express his feelings. In addition to his anxiety and concern, he now felt what he had never before experienced—jealousy.

He lingered but a short time, and would at once have sprung to his feet, had not the mystery fascinated him; causing him to wish to know if this stranger had any connection with the searching party.

Soon he decided that such a supposition was absurd in the extreme; for no secrecy would have been practiced, had such been the case.

The arrival of the colonel, and his evident amazement, and the instant search of the planters that followed, all proved conclusively to Leon, that the young girl had been abducted by some designing villain. Here was misery upon misery.

Leon Lisle groaned aloud, as he thought of the sufferings, and the horrors that poor Arline had experienced during that eventful day. She was now, he began to believe, on the very borders of insanity, from what she had already endured; and this new terror must be added to them.

When she recovered consciousness, she would find herself, not in safety, in the arms of her father, but a captive to some lawless ruffian, with a fate more or less terrible hanging over her.

Like electricity, these thoughts and conclusions flashed through the young man's mind, and he sprung to his feet, rushing along the mountain side southward; his teeth clinched, his handsome face pale, and convulsed with frenzy, and a thirst for vengeance upon the cowardly miscreant.

Woe be to the man who had thus stolen the daughter from the agonized father's arms, at the very moment that father had discovered his lost darling, and saw that she was alive, and within his reach!

It was terrible for the parent, Leon knew, but more terrible still for the child; the innocent maiden who had already suffered more than tongue could utter.

On like a madman rushed Leon, at the risk of life and limb, scaling rocky heights, and dashing recklessly down the sides of steep chasms; his knife fast clutched, and his eyes blazing with wrath.

After all the perils, and the terrors she had passed, Arline was doomed to still suffer on.

Had not the youth known the mountains

well, there would not have been the slightest chance for him to reach the gulch shelf, or to determine in his mind at what point the miscreant abductor would leave the gorge, and take to the mountain fastnesses.

With his burden, the dastard could not proceed, except very slowly; and there were ten chances to one that he would soon halt, and secrete himself, and his victim.

The sun was low in the west, and when darkness should set in, travel would be impossible. Already the dark shadows of approaching night, filled the lower portion of the gulch, the seams and chasms about him affording secure hiding-places.

Leon reasoned that the abductor would not leave the ledge, except to enter some covert, easy of access. He, therefore, made haste to descend at a favorable point, to the shelf, which he knew to be quite narrow at the distance he had gained from the scene of the startling occurrences.

He was soon on the narrow ledge, where semi-darkness now ruled, and he dashed up and down, sweeping keen glances everywhere, but no moving object met his view.

Lingered not a moment the young man started at a fast run southward toward the mouth of the gulch, but he had not gone twenty yards when, out from a dark cavity in the wall, the side of which his arm nearly brushed as he sped on, bounded a human form with uplifted club, which descended with great force upon his head.

He fell, as if shot through the brain, upon the rock ledge, there lying outstretched as if dead.

The blow was struck from behind, the cowardly assailant making sure not to reveal himself until the proper moment, as Leon darted past his covert.

Without stopping to examine his victim, the author of the dastardly attack caught up the apparently lifeless body and dragged it into the dark cavity in the rock, which was partially screened by the drooping mountain-grass.

In another moment the ruffian had darted again from his hiding-place bearing the senseless form of Arline Andrews clasped to his breast, the poor maiden's limbs hanging nerveless, her deathlike face upturned, her head bent in an unnatural position, and her golden hair flying wild and free over the miscreant's arm.

Even in the semi-twilight of the mountain-gorge, the sun being now low in the west, one could have distinguished the gloating look which the ruffian at times fixed upon the angelic face of his fair captive, and observed that his face had in it a look of intense triumph and cunning.

On dashed the unknown villain until a point was gained which was easy of descent from the shelf to the bed of the gulch. Then down in a stealthy manner the dastard made his way.

He was a young man, scarcely older than Leon Lisle, and of about the same build.

He was quite well attired in clothing that was not unfashionable in town or city at that time.

Proceeding at once to a thicket of pines, the ruffianly abductor and assassin placed his captive upon the sward, entered the pines, and soon reappeared, leading a horse fully equipped.

Placing Arline upon the saddle, as he would a bale of merchandise, he sprung upon the cantle, clasped her in his arms, gained his seat, and adjusted his feet in the stirrups. He then spurred to the bed of the gulch.

Strange and mysterious had been the appearance of this young man upon the scene. His acts had been dastardly, but stranger still and more amazing was his next movement.

Heading his horse up the gulch toward the scene of the startling occurrences of the day, and the spot where the party of planters had congregated, this man, with Arline Andrews in his arms, rode at terrific speed, yelling like a fiend.

As he came to a turn in the gulch, where it was much less dark—the same running here east and west—he perceived the planters approaching, at headlong gallop.

The hands and clothing of the youth were blood stained, as was also the clothing of Arline. It was the blood of Leon Lisle!

A wild cheer rung from the planters. Colonel Andrews spurred madly onward, and tore the form of his daughter from the arms of the lone rider, crying out, as his friends rode up:

"Where, in Heaven's name, Lawrence Linwood, did you find my darling? Speak! Is she injured? Who was the dastard that dragged her into the cedars on the ledge, and fled?"

The lone equestrian, addressed by the colonel as Lawrence Linwood, was, as we have stated, blood stained. He was, also, panting with exertion, in a painful and laborious manner. His face, naturally corpse-like, was now more so.

"I rescued Miss Andrews from her abductor."

Thus replied, or explained, young Linwood.

"Her abductor?" chorused the planters.

"So I have said," was the calm reply.

"Who, in the fiend's name, was he?"

Thus demanded Colonel Andrews.

"LEON LISLE!"

This was the miscreant's answer.

The listeners were hardly prepared for such a startling disclosure.

A wild and far-reaching chorus of mad and vengeful outcries now rung through the gulch.

It was that of an insane mob, now yelling frantically, and clamoring for blood!

Captain Gordon was ready to agree with his friend Andrews now.

CHAPTER VII.

CRUEL AS THE GRAVE.

SOME explanation is now necessary in regard to Lawrence Linwood, who played a most dastardly part, as has been detailed in the preceding chapter.

The father of young Linwood was a wealthy James river planter, and a neighbor of Colonel Andrews.

Linwood held a heavy mortgage on the colonel's plantation and slaves, partly through money loaned and partly through winnings at cards; he, the elder Linwood, being considered unscrupulous in his dealings. Still he was generally respected on account of his wealth, and the power that he wielded politically.

Both the elder and younger Linwoods were invited to join the hunting party given as a farewell by Colonel Andrews previous to his departure for Texas. Their relations, therefore, were friendly.

The settlement of financial matters between the two planters had been arranged secretly, no one at this time being the wiser.

Nearly all who associated with Colonel Andrews were of aristocratic and haughty families; but the ancestry of Linwood was unknown. He had come among them a stranger, with considerable means, and had purchased a small plantation. This from time to time had been enlarged, his speculations being very successful and he being besides remarkably fortunate at play.

At the time of which we write, gaming was quite fashionable in the higher circles in the South.

The fact of the case was that Linwood was not only of obscure birth, but had been a defaulter and forger, having, previously to appearance in Virginia, been a member of a mercantile house in New York. He had risen, by cunning and intrigue more than by true worth, from a menial position in the establishment, gaining more than one round of the ladder by embezzlement for which others were suspected.

The one grand object of this man's life at this time was to form an alliance for his son with some old and wealthy family. Previous to the commencement of this narrative, Arline Andrews had been selected as the victim.

The father of the young girl had been inveigled into gaming, and money had been loaned him in order that a hold might be gotten upon him; and thus Linwood's scheme promoted. The latter was a tall man, thin and spare in flesh, with a disagreeable and colorless face, fishy eyes, and a beaked, Jew-like nose.

The son, Lawrence, was like his father in complexion and feature; but he was more fleshy and robust in body, and quite muscular. He had however, a small head, greatly disproportioned to his body.

His eyes, too, were unlike the fishy optics of his father, being jet black, piercing, snake-like, and treacherous in expression.

Two more repulsive and disagreeable-looking human beings could scarce have been found in civilized society; but, through excessive and fawning politeness, cunningly-devised favors and flattery, coupled with wealth and political power gained through it, he had taken his place and maintained it.

He had, besides, a good education, which gave him a standing in rural society; and the "cheek" of father and son carried them through, without calling rebuff or insult upon them.

A more crafty, self-willed, and revengeful young man never lived, than Lawrence Linwood; and his father admired him for these qualities, and encouraged him to cultivate them.

The truth of the matter between the two planters in regard to their financial settlements, was as follows:

Linwood had, by previous hints, given Andrews to understand that he wished his son to wed the daughter of the latter, when she should arrive at a suitable age.

This had been, at first, a most disagreeable subject to the colonel, causing him to despise himself for having allowed Linwood to gain such power over him; but, as time went on, and he became deeper indebted, a change came over the spirit of his dream. Linwood took advantage of his neighbor's being somewhat addicted to drink, and used it.

Colonel Andrews began to be less and less offended at the proposed arrangement of difficulties; and, at the final settlement between the two, Linwood offered, if his favorite scheme was agreed to by the colonel, to permit the latter to dispose of his plantation, and other property, retain the money, and use the same to purchase a tract of land in Texas.

The mortgage was then to be transferred to this estate, in favor of young Linwood, but to be free of interest until the marriage of Arline to Lawrence.

Then the entire property was to be divided equally between the colonel and the young couple.

So generous an offer, especially from such a source, astonished and pleased Colonel Andrews greatly; he being a man of extravagant tastes and not a little family pride—his resolve to migrate from the home of his fathers being caused for the very reason, that he could not hope to maintain his old style of living, and this would humiliate him beyond the power of words to express.

In short, the colonel had decided that he would rather die, than live in a less expensive and luxurious manner in the home of his childhood, and where he had held himself in proud superiority, above most of his neighbors.

With the proceeds of the sale of his plantation, and such of his effects as could not be transported to Texas, he could there—if he agreed to the proposal of Linwood—become a princely planter, and retrieve his fortunes, probably before Arline would care to marry.

Having asked time to consider this proposal, the manner and words of the colonel convincing Linwood that but little pressure was needed to decide him in favor of signing the agreement; the plotter left his intended victim, to seek and confer with his son. This was after the invitations to the hunting party had been given out by Andrews, who had agreed to give his answer to Linwood, upon the return from the Blue Ridge Mountains.

It may be well to mention here, that young Linwood had become infatuated with Arline Andrews, notwithstanding her extreme youth. In fact, he worshiped her, and her aversion to him—which the fair girl took no pains to conceal—only caused him to be more determined that she should become his wife, when of a proper age.

The report of his father greatly pleased him, and the principal fear that they entertained in regard to the miscarrying of their plans, was through the possible—indeed the probable, demand of Colonel Andrews, for a clear family record; proofs, that is, of their standing and respectability previous to their advent in the Old Dominion.

That no mention of this had been made by the colonel, up to this time, they thought somewhat strange; but they were greatly pleased at the fact nevertheless, although they realized that it would be necessary for them to increase their power over the colonel, or to change the feelings of Arline toward Lawrence.

In the conference between father and son, previous to joining the hunting party, the former advised the latter to keep a close watch upon Arline during the trip; and to follow her, if she strayed from the main party, with the view of being of service to her, should she fall into danger.

This arrangement caused Lawrence to steal away from the hunting party after it had left the camp, toward the south; he keeping Jumbo Jim and his young mistress in view, as they proceeded afterward, northward, up the range.

When the maiden and her slave attendant entered the gulch, the young ruffian followed at a safe distance, secure from discovery. He was greatly puzzled that Arline should think of penetrating the wild, barren seam in the mountains; utterly devoid, as it was, of the beauties of nature, and, as he judged, a fitting lurking place for wild beasts, and repulsive and venomous reptiles.

Lawrence knew that the gulch extended some distance into the range; but that it must gradually become narrow and more narrow, and finally come to an end, which was insurmountable.

Arline and the negro must turn back, and that before a great lapse of time; and, as he thus decided, Lawrence dismounted, and led his horse into a dense thicket of pines.

Noticing the narrow shelf, easily reached, at that point, from the bed of the gulch, he quickly gained the same; but, fearing that Arline might have stopped to rest, directly beneath the cedars, and would bear his steps on the rocks, or that Jim would be on the alert, and possibly shoot him, the sneaking spy left the narrow ledge, and clambered up the wall of the gorge to its top.

Thus, he advanced to the very point, where, later on, Leon Lisle saw him, as he abducted Arline.

Before reaching that point, however, Lawrence heard the clattering hoofs of the girl's pony, as the affrighted animal stampeded down the gulch; this was followed by the report of Jumbo Jim's rifle, and then the gallop of his horse.

Like all men of his stamp, Lawrence Linwood was an arrant coward; and he at once decided that there was danger in the air. His face became more corpse-like and repulsive than ever—if such a thing were possible—as he observed that both the fleeing steeds were riderless.

Speeding some little distance to the north, he next gained a point near, as well as he could determine, where the rifle had been discharged.

There he threw himself prostrate; where, later on, Leon Lisle placed his head in the cavity, made by a portion of detached rock, to watch the scene below.

His father had advised him to follow Arline, with a view of being of assistance to her, should she be in any difficulty or danger; or, in order that he might earn her gratitude in some way.

He now saw, as he gazed downward, a most excellent opportunity to distinguish himself in that line; but he thanked the Fates that he was not in a location, or position, to sacrifice himself on such a shrine. Indeed, the scene caused his blood to chill with horror.

He began to think that all was lost—that his life hope was wrecked, for there seemed no possible way for Arline Andrews to escape death.

As he looked on in horror, Jumbo Jim was facing the female bear, after having shot the cub; and the spy trembled, as in an ague fit, as he saw the negro struck to the earth, mangled in a terrible manner, and evidently dying.

The bear, too, was preparing to attack Arline, who appeared bereft of all power to move, in an attempt to escape.

The clatter of hoofs on the shelf above this terrible scene, the arrival of Leon Lisle, and the quick descent of the latter on the rope, with his bound to the rescue—notwithstanding that this promised life and safety to the maiden whom he professed to worship, and had sworn by all the gods should be his wife—infuriated him beyond control.

The miserable spy became filled with jealous frenzy. He was hardly able to restrain a mad yell, or to shoot the youth down, who was about to perform a feat which he himself dared not attempt. The sight maddened him.

This youth would win the regard, the thanks and respect of Arline Andrews. What, indeed, was more probable than that he should stir a deeper feeling in the youthful maiden's heart?

Lawrence Linwood knew who this rival was.

He recognized, at once, in the new-comer, the son of a planter, named Lisle, whom he had met, when on business trips with his father, north of the James river.

Yes, he had seen, and observed him.

He was a princely, brave, daring and handsome youth; and one who was calculated to win the love of any maiden, even without having to gain the same through a daring rescue from a terrible death. And this he was now making a noble attempt to do.

It caused Lawrence Linwood to gnash his teeth, and to fairly foam at the mouth.

All this was in a moment's time.

His intense and fiendish passion was instantly transformed to just as intense relief, exultation and hellish joy, when the report of Leon's rifle seemed to be the death-signal for the latter as well as for the bear; for both fell, the beast with its last strength knocking Leon senseless and bleeding to the rock bed of the gulch, the huge paw of the animal remaining upon the lacerated breast of its slayer.

Arline Andrews fell senseless at nearly the same time, but the spy well knew that she would retain in her memory forever the form and face of the youth who had saved her from death, and that her gratitude to Leon Lisle would be life-long should the latter survive.

Now it was that the cowardly villain regretted not having remained at a safe distance from Arline in the gorge, for in that case he could have rushed up to the scene as the bear fell dead, and Leon apparently so, thus being able to secure the maiden, and bear her in that senseless condition to camp.

This would have been a "big card."

Lawrence was about to rush back to the gulch by the same route that he had ascended from it, and thence up to the bend, from which he could carry out the project mentioned.

But now, to his still greater horror and astonishment, he discovered the monarch of the mountains—the much dreaded Big Bear of the Blue Ridge, of which he had often heard.

There could be no such thing as mistaking its identity.

A more terrible, huge, and hideously savage beast of the kind had probably never existed.

This bear was waddling along the ledge, on the trail of the horse that had been ridden by Leon Lisle. It was snuffing the air, and growling with evident rage.

Soon the mammoth beast reached the horse, which reared and pranced and snorted, striving to break the rope that secured it to a cedar-tree.

Then followed a fearful spectacle.

But the spy was conscious of movements in another quarter, and he relapsed into the most frantic rage and jealousy as he discovered that Leon and Arline had recovered, and that the former was leading the latter in a careful and affectionate manner toward the base of the gulch wall, directly beneath his position.

Such was Lawrence Linwood's jealous fury, that he even meditated seeking a huge stone and hurling the same down upon the handsome youth who, it was plain to see, had thrown him

"flat on his back," as far as gaining the gratitude of Arline was concerned.

When Leon assisted the terrified girl to the top of the boulder and then, securing his rifle, regained her side—Arline, in the fullness of her grateful heart, throwing her arms about the neck of her rescuer—then the corpse-like face of the spy became of a sickly, yellowish hue; his black, serpent-like eyes seemed to emit sparks of fire, as they flashed venomous hatred downward. His fingers tore at the rock, and foam flew from his blue lips.

Lawrence Linwood's whole body contorted in spasms of fury that threatened to become ungovernable and cause him to writhe from the one side to the other of the ledge, as though he would fall to the boulders below.

An event which, in kindness and mercy to others, ought to have occurred!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PLOTTER AND HIS PLOT.

To remain inactive, and see Arline Andrews, with her gold-crowned head resting upon the breast of Leon Lisle, her fair arms about his neck, was to Lawrence Linwood torture—the very extremity of torture; but, as the saying has it, "he had to grin and bear it."

His "grin," however, was more like the menacing curl of the lips of an enraged panther, displaying as it did his tightly-clinched and yellowish teeth—a most beast-like expression of face—and his eyes starting from their sockets.

So intent was he upon watching each motion of the youthful pair, whom deadly danger had thus brought together, that Lawrence noticed nothing of the fierce struggle between bear and horse, and heard not the fall of the two animals over the edge of the shelf into the pines.

In consequence of this, he was destined to experience another sudden revision of feelings, emotions and passion; his hopeless despair at the thought that the hopes and aims of his life were to be jeopardized by Leon Lisle—that his infatuation, his adoration for Arline was to be trampled in the dust by a rival, compared with whom he knew that he was a hideous beast—his intense, murderous hatred and longing for revenge—all were transformed into as intense an exultation in a very short space of time, as he witnessed the attempt of the young girl to scale the wall of the gulch to the ledge below his point of observation.

At this time, Leon was standing at the base of the wall, his rifle ready, and the mammoth bear, all blood-smeared and enraged, was advancing from the pines. The beast was snuffing the blood-tainted air, and smelling of its dead mate and cub.

Then, with gleaming teeth and fiery eyes, it waddled over the rough rocks, toward Leon Lisle.

That the latter could slay this huge monster, Lawrence Linwood did not, for an instant, deem possible.

Leon was to be removed from his path!

He was doomed, without a doubt!

The spy was filled with insane joy and triumph. But this again was destined to be changed to baffled fury, as he witnessed the ascent of his rival, up the wall, to avoid the raging monster that approached him.

The sneaking coward, on the ledge, saw that Arline was now dazed with fright, and that she could proceed no further.

It was possible, indeed, that she might lose her hold, and thus fall into the jaws of the infuriated beast. This now caused the lurking villain the extreme of torture.

Lawrence Linwood felt now, more than ever before in his life, that all his hopes, and schemes for the future, depended upon Arline Andrews.

His very existence rested upon this moment.

He even felt, that he could feel reconciled and relieved if Leon escaped—if Arline could only be saved through the safety of his hated rival.

He vowed, however, that the daring youth should die; that never again should the young hunter meet Arline Andrews!

Murder, and that most foul, was in the spy's heart and brain.

That the life of Arline depended upon the escape of her rescuer from the bear, Lawrence was soon forced to realize. Indeed he began to think that both would fall to the base of the gulch wall, and be torn in pieces.

But the report of the young man's rifle, and the fall of the monster, just as the watcher believed that its jaws were about to close over the limbs of the one he so hated, relieved Lawrence, from whose pale face fell great drops of cold perspiration. The cowardly sneak was now trembling with the intensity of his emotions.

Had he been stretched upon the rack, he could not have suffered more than he did.

His feelings and passions had been changing from one extreme to another, with the movements, the peril, or the escape from the same, that he had been so intently observing.

And, in addition to this, the manifest regard, exhibited by each to the other, had not been unnoticed by him. This was agony, in itself.

Then, as both gained the rocky shelf, and were seated side by side, clasped in each other's arms, the spy became so filled with the most demoniac hatred and jealousy, that he regretted that both had not fallen into the fatal embrace of the bear.

Quivering with passion, Lawrence Linwood, unable longer to bear the torturing sight below him, sprung back and then upward upon his knees, when, upon casting a glance afar down the mountain-gorge, he detected moving objects.

In a few moments he could see that they were horsemen galloping up the gulch.

He knew at once what it meant.

Colonel Andrews and his friends were coming in search of the young girl whom they had missed.

Of this the spy was confident.

Lawrence was sure that his own father was one of the approaching party.

He knew intuitively what had occasioned it.

The stampeded horse and pony had galloped into the camp of the hunters, and thus betrayed the fact that some accident had happened to Arline and her colored escort.

This was "the most bitter pill in the box" to Lawrence Linwood, for the planters would now find Leon and Arline.

But they would find far more. They would see the proof of the brave and daring rescue of the maiden by the former, for they were within plain view of all.

Young Lisle would be flattered by every one.

He would be the hero of the hour with the planters, and the hero of all heroes for life to Arline and her father.

He knew not, it will be seen, of any enmity between the colonel and the Lises.

The former would now refuse to sign any agreement unless Arline was first consulted on the subject and her consent obtained.

All the anguish that the colonel must have suffered while thinking his daughter might be dead would affect the old man so much that he would become fonder of her than ever when she should be restored to his arms in safety.

He would bid Linwood go to Hades with his agreement and do his worst. He would pay the amount of the mortgage in full and start life again on what was wholly his own.

He would no longer think of selling his darling, his only child.

This would be the upshot, the end of the whole matter. So Lawrence fully believed, and he became murderously desperate.

The cavalcade now came on at headlong speed, clattering over the rocky bed of the gulch.

Lawrence detected a chance below.

Leon had heard the noise of the hoofs and seemed surprised. Not only this, he was clearly alarmed. He was manifestly anxious to avoid meeting the new-comers.

He evidently meditated departure.

Strange and unaccountable as this was, Lawrence soon saw that it was the true condition of affairs.

Why it was that Leon Lisle did not wish to remain, and receive the just plaudits, praise, and commendation, that would be showered upon him, was marvelously strange.

So, at least, thought Lawrence Linwood.

But, it was all right, if such was the case.

If Leon did "make tracks" from the vicinity, Lawrence believed that all would yet be well.

Something would, in that event, turn up, to compensate him for his suffering.

He crawled back from the edge of the steep precipice, and hastened to return to the shelf, at the point where he had gained the mountain side.

He reached the ledge, and stole along it in a northward direction, being screened by the cedars from the view of the planters.

He had gone but a little distance, when to his great joy, he perceived Leon Lisle, rushing from the bend, and up the shelf, to the northward.

All was well. It was as well as he had hoped. And now a new plan darted through the mind of this villain and coward.

He would dash up, along the ledge, and drag Arline from view, among the cedars. Then he would hasten with her to a place of hiding.

The fright that the young girl would receive, by his clutching her, might in her state of mental and physical depression, caused her to faint; and, if so, he had the game in his hands.

He would cause her to believe that, after she had been deserted by young Lisle—left by him in that perilous position—he, Lawrence Linwood had saved her from being dashed in pieces on the rocks below her perch; as she sunk, fainting, after being left in that dangerous place, by the cowardly fellow, who was either afraid or ashamed to meet her father, and the friends who were in search of her.

Some other advantage, should this fail, might occur to favor him.

Thus the wretch reasoned, and believed. But his heart and hopes sunk, as he saw, on glancing through the cedars, that Arline had been discovered by her father and his party.

But now, the non-action and strange manner of those in the gulch again puzzled him.

It was but for a moment, however.

He perceived that the shock occasioned by Leon's departure, and the appearance of the cavalcade in search of her, had so affected the sensitive and overtaxed Arline, that she was on the point of fainting, as before.

If she did, she would fall to the rocks below, and meet her death!

The mind of the villain was busy, and instantly his previously-formed plan seemed feasible.

He would save Arline from falling from the shelf, but he would not reveal himself.

Her proximity to the cedars, made this easy of accomplishment.

The horse of Leon had, undoubtedly, been killed by the monster bear; and some of the planters would probably recognize the animal, or its equipments.

He himself would abduct Arline, and then, as Leon Lisle had disappeared, the latter would be supposed to be the abductor.

Hastily formed and carried out was this plan, as the reader knows, Lawrence Linwood rushing, with his unconscious captive, from the point to which he had dragged her through the cedars, and along the shelf south, toward the place where he had left his horse.

Without deciding upon any definite plan of proceeding, the scoundrel darted into a dark cavity in the wall of the gulch, and laid the senseless form of his captive upon the rock within. He then caught up a heavy club, which he found in the cave-like covert, and sprang back to the opening; for he had detected the sound, as of a man running fast, along the rocks in his rear.

Although it was now the twilight, the ruffian recognized Leon Lisle, coming down the narrow ledge; and he, there and then, resolved that he would end his rival's earthly career.

He would at once put an end to all his doubts and fears.

Thus awaiting, until Leon was just past the cavity in the rock, the miscreant sprang upon him from behind, and felled him, by a single blow upon the back of his head, to the shelf, as has been described.

Lawrence Linwood had but little doubt in regard to having put an end to his rival; but there was no time to satisfy himself on that point. That Leon was dead as a door-nail he felt must be the case; and he dragged him into the gloomy little cavern in the wall, and there flung the limp form heavily from him.

Senseless, poor Leon lay for a moment; and Arline, whom he had so lately met for the first time, but each loving the other as life, was in the same condition. Both were now in the power of a merciless demon, in the shape of a man; but neither of them showed signs of life.

Then Lawrence formed the plan of playing the gallant rescuer; for he dared not attempt to escape with his captive, or to hide her, as he feared discovery.

He would, at all events, gain the gratitude of Colonel Andrews, the praise of his father, and the thanks and commendation of all.

There was, at last, a trump card in his hand, and that of a high denomination.

It ought to be a winning one.

But, win or lose, he would play it.

That Lawrence Linwood did play the part—the part of a coward and a villain—the reader knows, and future chapters will reveal the result.

CHAPTER IX.

DEAD OR ALIVE.

THE elder Linwood was among the searchers, having volunteered, for the very good reason that he knew his son had followed Arline Andrews, acting upon his advice; and the return of the maiden's pony, and the horse of the slave attendant, to the camp, had excited and alarmed the old plotter.

He began to fear that some terrible accident had happened, and that Lawrence might have been killed or injured, as well as Arline.

A fatal accident to either would ruin all his plans, and blight all the remaining years of his life.

Upon reaching the scene of the first conflict, the elder Linwood was the most agonized man in the searching party; for he believed that his son must have been fatally hurt in protecting the young girl from the bear, and that he had crawled into some nook or thicket to die.

Frantically he had searched up and down the gulch but without betraying the fact that he supposed, or believed his son to have been in the vicinity; he only feigned to be looking for the body of the man who had ridden the slain horse—Leon Lisle.

Not one of the party had any thought whatever in regard to Lawrence Linwood; for they believed him to have branched off, on a lone trip, in the morning.

All knew that it was not poor Jumbo Jim who had killed the bears.

The bear, at the foot of the wall, had been shot in the mouth, when upon its haunches, by some one who had been scaling the cliff; and, as Arline was seated upon the shelf, exactly above the carcass, it was plain that she had been res-

cued by the man who had shot the notorious beast that had been a terror for years in the Blue Ridge.

It was generally thought that Leon Lisle had slain both bears, and saved the life of Arline Andrews; but, if so, where was he? Why had he left her in so perilous a position?

Report said that he had given information to mountain outlaws, which enabled the latter to escape arrest, and to secure booty, at places and times when they could not have done so, unless such information had been given them.

Not a man, for a hundred miles from the James river, knew the mountains better than did Leon Lisle; and it had more than once been hinted that he must be the secret friend of the outlaws of the mountains.

When the absence of Leon was commented on, and his corpse could not be found, all decided that, although he had done a most commendable, daring, and noble deed, he was afraid to be found in the wild gulch by a body of excited men, who were prejudiced against him.

Then again, he might have been assisted in slaying the bears, by some of the outlaws.

But when they saw Arline drawn into the cedars, from their view—the man who seized her keeping himself secreted in the branches—the planters became more suspicious; all believing, beyond a doubt, that young Lisle was the one who had performed the act; that he had recalled the fact that he had left the maiden on that perilous height, and returned to place her in safety.

Their suspicions as to his dishonest character were strengthened by his persisting in keeping hidden, but when they scaled the side of the gorge and found that Arline was not upon the ledge, then all were convinced that Leon Lisle, with the assistance of the noted gang of Mountain Mose, had slain the bears, thus saving Arline's life; but struck with her beauty, he had become instantly infatuated with her, and resolved that she should be his victim. The reasoning seemed plausible.

This decision was perhaps formed by many, through their knowledge of their own passions and inclinations in their younger days.

All knew or believed that Leon and Arline had never previously met; but this only served to increase their suspicions, as he would not have dared carry her off had he known her name, and that her father, with a large party of friends, was near at hand. No; all seemed perfectly clear.

All had observed the evident dazed condition in which poor Arline was, when seated upon the rock.

This appeared to prove that there could not have been any confidence or explanations between the two.

The shriek given out by the terrified maiden, as the hands of the unseen man clasped her and she turned suddenly around, proved conclusively that, although her life had been probably saved by this very individual, yet she stood in mortal fear and terror of him, and wished not even to be relieved from her dangerous position by him.

She was undoubtedly suspicious in regard to his motives being for her good, to say the least.

But all felt that they must instantly set to work.

A complete circuit must be made by the whole party, and every point examined; hounds in leash being put on the scent.

This decision caused, as is known, all to start down the gulch at a gallop, in order that they might reach the camp as soon as possible and return in full force.

No man in the entire company was more thoroughly convinced of the guilt of Leon Lisle than was Arline's father, and with good reason, as the promise exacted of the young girl by Leon served in itself to explain.

Colonel Andrews had, however, decided just the opposite, in speaking to his friends in regard to the young man. He believed truly that it was in consequence of Arline's having revealed her name and residence to Leon, that he had made up his mind to abduct her.

But his belief was that the motive was entirely revenge, and not to harm the maiden.

Much as he hated the Lises, he well knew that none of them were capable of crime or of anything that was dishonorable. They were, every man of them, honest and brave, to a fault.

But, for all that, he permitted the planters to give vent to their suspicions and accusations, and to vent their fury without contradiction; secretly rejoiced at the prospect of the disaster, if not death, that hovered over those whom he unjustly hated. This feeling increased as he thought of the possibility of Arline's giving her inmost gratitude and perhaps admiration to the brave and handsome youth who had, as it seemed, saved her from a horrible fate at the risk of his own life.

The cry which Arline had uttered as the hands from the cedars had clutched her and saved her from falling, a mangled corpse, upon the rocks below, had been misinterpreted by every one except her father.

The colonel was confident that this shriek had been given as a vent to his daughter's terror, as

she had, recovering for an instant, realized her danger. She had then, he believed, fainted at the sudden reaction produced by a transition from the very gate of death to life and safety through the timely arrival of the same heroic youth who had saved her from the bears.

Colonel Andrews, furious though he was, could not bring himself to believe that any bodily harm would happen to his child through Leon Lisle.

It was probable, indeed, that the young man wished to enjoy her presence, and to receive her thanks upon her recovery, and he might even think of restoring her to her home.

Leon might be infatuated with Arline, and repudiating the enmity that existed between their parents, originating in the long ago, might intrigue—young though they both were—to marry her, or gain her love, and then cast her off, thus avenging his own family.

The whole affair was so mysterious that the anguish-stricken father was tortured by a whirl of thoughts beyond all reason, and he was in a state of mind that bordered on frenzy at the time that Lawrence Linwood appeared, to the great surprise of all, with Arline in his arms.

The appearance of the repulsive young man, who aspired to his daughter's hand, and whose father held such a power over him, was as strange and mysterious as the fact that he had with him the missing girl.

But the overjoyed parent did not allow any thoughts of that nature to burden his mind.

Solicitude for his child, and heartfelt gratitude for her preservation overruled all else as he took Arline from the arms of young Linwood, whose face now wore an expression of demoniac triumph and gloating self-satisfaction; his snake-like eyes glittering with murderous light, notwithstanding that he endeavored to suppress all such emotions.

Colonel Andrews shuddered, as he caught a view of the repulsive countenance; and he was filled with horror at the bare idea of his darling Arline being linked for life to such a being. But he muttered extravagant thanks, and then gave all his attention to his loved child, whose dread experiences he could scarcely bring himself to think of. She was now more like a corpse than a living being.

Colonel Andrews gave not a thought to the mad and vengeful yells of his friends when Lawrence Linwood asserted that he had rescued Arline from Leon Lisle, who, he declared, had been hastening with her along the gulch-wall, as he fled from the searching party.

The colonel at once dismounted, procured a canteen of water, and strove to bring his darling back to consciousness, while the tears flowed freely down his cheeks as he saw her thus senseless through terror. He feared that she would die. Indeed, this was very like death.

He took no notice of his friends. He no longer cared for the wild revenge that they were meditating. He could think only of his child.

Lawrence Linwood became now the chief and center of the entire party.

His father was frantic with relief and intense joy and exultation, at the most flattering success and prowess of the hopeful Lawrence, in carrying out their pre-arranged programme.

It had been executed far beyond even their wildest dreams and expectations.

Beyond a doubt, Arline Andrews would now be the bride-elect of young Linwood.

Most providential had it been, he reflected, that his son had rescued Arline, as the latter would have been lost to them had Leon Lisle been the means of restoring her to her father.

Not for a moment did Major Linwood imagine that Leon had meditated any wrong to the girl.

It was tolerably certain that the youth had become infatuated with her at first sight, and, as he had saved her, he very naturally coveted the pleasure of filling the whole bill, and bearing her to her home. In this way he would balk any who might be too deeply interested in her.

But for all this, the cries for vengeance made by him were the loudest of all.

There was no doubt in the mind of any of the others that Leon was connected with the outlaws, and that his intention had been to carry Arline to their secret stronghold.

This was shouted and repeated, and Lawrence was ordered to lead on to the spot where Leon had been struck to the earth and despoiled of his fair captive.

"But I think I must have killed him—I am almost sure of it!"

Thus said the consummate villain, knowing well that any opposition would increase the anger and eagerness of the mob.

"Very good. We'll make sure of it!"

"We'll hang him, dead or alive!"

"Lead on lively, Lawrence!"

"Death to the abductor!"

Such cries filled the air, and Lawrence Linwood at a hint from his father—which, however, was not necessary—galloped to that point of the gulch where he had descended from the shelf with the unconscious Arline.

Major Linwood knew that if Leon Lisle was not dead he would not only be a dangerous

rival to his son, but that henceforth he would be a deadly enemy as well.

The son felt this to the full extent also, and since reflecting on it he began to think that possibly he had killed Leon. He might only have been stunned by the blow.

Dismounting, all secured their horses, Major Linwood making sure to take with him a lariat. They then ran in a body along the narrow ledge, Lawrence in the lead, having in his hands several dry pine fagots, picked up in the gulch.

Upon reaching the cavelike space in the side of the wall, Lawrence struck a light and ignited the torches. These the planters eagerly caught up, and with cocked revolvers dashed into the dark opening in the rocks.

The next moment loud cries of baffled rage, amazement and horror came from every throat. Lawrence Linwood, pallid as a corpse, fell backward in aversion from the blood-stained rock floor of the little cavern.

All recoiled toward the entrance, for their torches had revealed, at their very feet, a black and yawning abyss, the rocks on its verge stained with blood; but the body of him they sought was nowhere to be seen.

Plain evidence, however, was there before the appalled planters that it had been there, as Lawrence had asserted, and also plain evidence as to what had become of it.

Leon Lisle had not been killed by the blow, but, in his writhings when recovering, had rolled into the dark subterranean depths of the mountains.

So the searchers all reasoned.

One of the planters cast a fragment of rock over into the abyss.

All gazed, one at another, and listening intently; but it seemed an age before the sound of the stone was heard afar down, striking again and again with a dismal echo.

Every one shuddered, except Lawrence Linwood.

He now saw that he had escaped death in those fearful depths by but a hair. And not only he, but Arline, when he had dashed into this cavern with her; and later, when he had left her there for a space while bent on murder.

All were dumfounded and speechless. They stood, with horror stamped upon their faces, as they saw what had been their own narrow escape from a terrible death; when, in their headlong haste and eager for the blood of a fellow-being, they had dashed blindly forward.

At that instant Arline Andrews, her golden hair flying wild, her eyes fixed and her face like that of a corpse, rushed through the group of planters, screaming as she ran.

"Leon! Oh, Leon, speak to me! Back, you coward! Harm him if you dare! Where is Leon Lisle?"

Infuriated, to the very verge of madness, with newly-aroused jealousy, Lawrence Linwood held his lighted torch downward, pointing to the blood; and thence, over into the black abyss, down into which he cast the blazing fagot, more fully to reveal the fearful chasm.

Every man stood in his place, speechless.

With a piercing shriek, Arline Andrews threw up her hands, clinched her fingers tightly into her palms, and then fell forward, senseless—being caught in the arms of Major Linwood!

CHAPTER X.

LIFE AND FREEDOM.

LAWRENCE LINWOOD struck no light blow, when he felled Leon Lisle to the shelf of the gulch and had not the latter had on a thick felt hat, he would, without doubt, have been found in the same spot to which the villainous coward had dragged him, when the searchers reached it.

As it was, he was only stunned for the moment; the profuse flow of blood, doubtless, relieving his brain from the numbness caused by the blow.

Rising to a sitting posture, the young man remained thus for a brief space, quite bewildered; but soon the near past was revealed to his mind, and he was terribly enraged at the unknown dastard who had struck him in such a craven manner, leaving him for dead, and fleeing with Arline.

At first, Leon fully believed that his assailant had been one of the mountain outlaws, before referred to. These, contrary to the suspicion entertained by some of the planters, had a violent hatred toward the youth; for he had been the means, in his own county, of having several of the band captured.

But, upon clapping his hand to his belt, and ascertaining that his weapons had not been taken from him, and that his money, watch, and jeweled compass also remained, he knew that this could not be the case.

He felt greatly relieved, upon this discovery; for he now thought that some of the searchers must have taken him for an outlaw, bearing Arline away, and had only attempted to rescue her.

Then he recalled his position, and location on the ledge, at the time of being struck senseless; and he now perceived that he was in a cavern, to enter far beyond the opening of which, was

death! He had explored this cavity, and knew of the awful subterranean depths.

Stretching his arm beyond him, Leon shuddered; for he was on the very verge of the chasm.

Quickly he crawled toward the entrance of the cave, devoutly thankful for his deliverance. Never before had he been so near to his death.

Gaining the shelf, he trod up the same for some distance north; then, parting the cedar branches, warned by the clattering hoofs that the searching party were in the vicinity, he glanced below.

There he saw, dashing up the gorge, with Arline in his arms, a young man, whom he knew to be a cowardly and unscrupulous villain—Lawrence Linwood!

This, then, was the miscreant, who had felled him from behind, with some heavy weapon.

Leon had heard rumors of a desire, on the part of Major Linwood, that his son should wed the daughter of Colonel Andrews; and he knew that the former held heavy mortgages on the Andrews property, which, it was said, were to be canceled when the proposed marriage took place.

When this had been told him, he had no interest in the matter; for he had never even seen Arline Andrews. But now, circumstances had changed. Arline was his hope, his guiding star; and the sight of the detested Lawrence Linwood, clasping the fair maiden to his breast, was perfectly maddening.

He began to think that the rumors were correct.

The dastard had not, Leon knew, been with the party of searchers. He had stolen, cautiously, up the shelf, and had seized the poor girl, without having been seen by the planters in the gulch.

Leon Lisle could, no longer, have any doubt as to who it was, that had played the part of abductor, and his reasons for so doing.

Young Linwood had, it was certain, been lurking in the rear of Arline, and had been a spectator of her danger from the first. He had, therefore, been a witness, too, of the maiden's manifestations of regard and gratitude.

This must have aroused the jealous fury of Lawrence; and he had watched for an opportunity of revenge, or to turn the tables in his own favor. And the wretch had, so far, been flatteringly successful.

Little time was left to Leon for reflection.

He soon had startling proofs, that his surmises, as to the plans and intentions of the villain, were correct in every particular.

He saw the cavalcade of planters gallop up to Lawrence, Colonel Andrews in advance, the latter tearing his daughter from young Linwood's arms; and he heard the miscreant assert that he had, as he believed, slain him, after rescuing Arline, whom he, Leon, had dragged from the ledge, and was carrying away.

He heard the cry of the planters for vengeance; demanding his death, if he yet lived, by the rope.

He heard himself accused of affiliating with the outlaws of the Blue Ridge; and he knew that he was doomed, if the infuriated mob once got him in their clutches. Yet he stood with a sneering smile upon his face, entirely free from fear. He was planning his revenge.

Leon Lisle formed resolutions strong as oaths in regard to Arline Andrews, vowing that no man on earth should come between him and the maiden whom he had risked his life to save. He felt relieved, however, when he saw her in her father's arms.

She was safe now, and she would soon recover.

She would, of course, be told that he had stolen her, and had been taking her away to outlaw haunts when she was rescued by the brave and daring Linwood; but Arline would spurn and scorn those who thus explained it. She would forever believe in him.

Of this Leon felt assured.

He had every confidence in her, young though she was, and he knew that she had the same in him; and that, despite all attempts to break her belief in his honor, truth and love, she would be firm and immovable.

That there would be a hue and cry after him, when the planters ascertained that he had recovered and left the cavern, he was well aware; but he also knew that they might as well search for the proverbial needle in the hay-stack as to look for him in the Blue Ridge.

He scorned the maddened mob, and resolved that he would not budge an inch, but would remain in the cedars where he could keep an eye on all that went on.

The entire party, he could see, were now wholly irresponsible. Leon believed, and with good reason, that he was the only sane man in the gulch.

He saw Lawrence Linwood lead the frenzied mob up and along the shelf to the mouth of the cavern, and he had much satisfaction at the thought of their disappointment and rage when they found that he had escaped them.

Not until they rushed headlong into the cave, one crowding the other, did Leon recall the dark abyss, and he shuddered from head to foot. Had

it not been too late, he would have run to warn them of their danger, regardless of the fact that they were bent upon hanging him.

But the time had passed when such a warning would have availed to save them.

Listening intently, he could now hear their murmured ejaculations, first of disappointment and then of horror, when they perceived the dark depths before them; but there was no sound which would indicate that any of their number had fallen into the fearful trap.

Then all became silent. None emerged, however; and Leon, gazing down into the gulch, discovered that neither Colonel Andrews nor his daughter were to be seen.

Puzzled and alarmed, he peeped from among the branches, down the ledge to the cavern, when his heart sprang to his throat as he beheld Arline rushing wildly along the shelf, and presenting a sight that tortured him almost beyond endurance.

He clutched the cedars for support, and partly to keep himself from dashing forward and clasping her in his arms, assuring her of his safety, and defying the mob.

Instantly, however, the agonized maiden flew into the cavern, calling out his name in excited tones, and threatening those who sought his life.

Then came a loud shriek from the poor girl, and had not Colonel Andrews just then rushed up to the cavern, Leon could no longer have restrained himself.

Suddenly there burst upon the young man's mind the solution of the mystery.

The cries of disappointment and anger, and then of horror, and the dead silence that followed, none of the planters emerging from the cavern—these, with the wild cry of Arline, all pointed to but one solution. It was evident that the planters supposed that he had rolled into the fearful chasm, or been cast into it by Lawrence Linwood.

The thought of such a terrible fate had banished their mad desire for revenge, creating more of sympathy and regret than hatred and rage.

All this must have been interpreted by the poor girl at the first glance, hence her shriek of horror and anguish. The silence that followed indicated that she had fainted.

Like all the rest, Arline believed him to be a crushed and mangled body far down in the awful depths of the subterranean chasm!

This was retribution.

There was some consolation to the outraged feelings of Leon, as far as the mob were concerned; but he must take care that poor Arline should know, and that before much time had passed, that he lived. She must also know the perfidy of Lawrence Linwood, the cowardly assassin, who should feel his vengeance!

As affairs now stood, there was no need that he should remain where he was, and Leon, well knowing that Arline would be cared for, stole along within the fringe of cedars, and up the ledge to the north, reaching the very spot where he and the lovely maiden had been seated, when the sound of the hoofs of the approaching cavalcade had caused him to bid her a hasty farewell, and take his departure.

Below him lay the monster of the mountains, and a little beyond, its mate and the cubs.

There, too, lay the mutilated corpse of the faithful attendant of Arline, the rays of the silvery moon, which now rode high in the celestial dome, being reflected in the glazed eyes of poor Jumbo Jim.

The pines screened the torn and mangled carcass of his much prized steed, Surefoot; and the whole scene in the silvery moonlight, was wild, and weird, and horrible.

Only death ruled there!

The events of the day had been most startling and bewildering. Not alone this; they had been torturing in the extreme.

But, at the same time, mingled with these emotions, or rather, as it were, sandwiched between them, Leon Lisle had experienced the first great happiness of his life—the greatest, possibly, that a human being can enjoy on earth.

More like a dream than a reality, did those occurrences appear to Leon, as each came before his mind's eye, in panoramic array.

But, as he became calmer, he began to realize the important bearing these events must have upon his future.

He felt like another being; that he had been, so to speak, transported to another world. All his hopes, and plans, and ideas, had undergone an entire change; and that, through having met his fate—Arline Andrews.

The future must have much in store for him; but, it was not to be gained without close application, and constant labor of mind and body.

Leon vowed most solemnly that this young girl should yet be his loving wife, even though he must move the world to accomplish that end; and that Lawrence Linwood should feel his vengeance, in more ways than one.

But, notwithstanding his great mental excitement, the young mountain-roamer was now as hungry as a wolf. He felt that he could devour, if not a bear, at least the better portion of a

cub; especially as he must make a night of it in the gulch. He was satisfied that he would not be disturbed, unless it might be by predatory beasts, that would scent the blood of the slaughtered animals; but for these, he cared little.

Descending to the bed of the gulch, Leon quickly removed the skins of two of the cubs, and placed them over the corpse of Jumbo Jim. He then cut out the most palatable portions of the meat, and having kindled a fire around the point of rocks, broiled the steaks, and partook of them in large quantities. His appetite had not been lessened by love, as is frequently the case with swains, in towns and cities.

Feeling much strengthened, he proceeded to repair his tattered clothing as well as he could; applied salve, from a box which he always carried with him, to his bruises and scratches, and then set to work to remove the skins of the two mammoth bears—a task that occupied some time, as the carcasses were now cold and stiffened.

When this was accomplished, the skins were rolled up, placed in a cavity of the gulch wall, and the same walled up with stones, to prevent wolves from tearing them.

Removing the saddle and bridle from his dead horse, Leon loosened his blankets from the cantle; and, entering a thicket, spread his couch.

Rolling himself in the blankets, his saddle for a pillow, and his weapons ready for instant use, he fell into a deep slumber; for his exertions through the long day, coupled with the loss of much blood, caused him to feel languid and very sleepy, when the reaction came.

Bright and early Leon was astir, and partook of a hearty breakfast of cub-meat; after which, he, with no little difficulty, rolled the body of the poor negro into a natural hollow in the bed of the gulch, near the wall of the same.

Then, after covering forever the unfortunate slave from mortal eye, with the skins of the cubs, he placed a pyramid of large stones over the grave.

Then Leon made sure that his "cached" skins would not be readily found, and packing his saddle and bridle on his back, rifle in hand, he started up the gulch, and thence to the ledge, upon which he had approached the scene of his strange and startling adventures. Thence, by a circuitous route, he reached the upper mountain-side, along which he proceeded northward toward his home, nearly fifty miles away; intending to avoid observation, throughout this long journey on foot.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WORST OF IT.

COLONEL ANDREWS, after the departure of his friends in quest of Leon Lisle, strove to revive his daughter, whose appearance was such as to give him very great anxiety.

The colonel would have much rather had his right arm amputated, than compel, or even advise his darling to link her fate with the son of Major Linwood, had not the latter possessed the power that he did. His great dread was that he should be obliged to lead a life, which, compared with his past, seemed to him one of poverty and disgrace.

Even when this was taken into consideration, his conscience tortured him for even entertaining the idea of bestowing his daughter upon Lawrence Linwood.

But this alleged rescue of Arline, by the young man, changed the appearance of affairs, and greatly relieved Colonel Andrews from his self-reproaches.

Up to this time, the colonel had never mentioned the subject to Arline, neither had he spoken to her of his embarrassed financial condition.

He was aware that she looked with aversion upon Lawrence, and strove to avoid him; but never had he greater hope of a final and favorable adjustment between himself and Major Linwood, than when the young man rode up the gorge, with Arline in his arms, proclaiming that he had rescued her from her abductor, Leon Lisle.

It will be seen that the colonel, in spite of his love for his only child, thought strongly of sacrificing her to his own selfish desires.

But, to return to the young girl.

Her father, in his anxiety and alarm, bathed her head, and forced water between her lips; and soon had the satisfaction of hearing her breathe a heavy sigh, and then slowly open her eyes.

At first, Arline had not the slightest idea where she was, or what had occurred; she was so bewildered at finding herself in such a spot, in the night time. But this state of mind was only momentary. Soon she heard her father exclaim:

"Thank God, my darling, you are spared to me! We can never repay Lawrence Linwood for having so nobly rescued you from the miscreant who was carrying you away, before our eyes—bearing you off to some retreat, to a fate that I dare not think of!"

Arline sprung up on hearing this; her eyes filled with a strange wild light, as she demanded:

"Father, what do you mean? Who, did you say rescued me? Explain, father! How came I here?"

This came in rapidly-spoken words, and a nervous and excited manner.

"You were saved, my child, from that villain, Leon Lisle; who stole you from before our eyes, as I have said. Young Linwood knocked him down—probably killed him—then he tore you from the wretch's arms, and brought you here."

"Lawrence is a brave, manly youth; and I begin to see that we have misunderstood his character. But, compose yourself, Arline!"

"Our friends have gone in hunt of Lisle; and, if he still has life in his coward carcass, they will hang him to the nearest tree, as he deserves."

While the colonel was thus speaking, his daughter sat, rigid and silent. But, no sooner had the last word of her father been uttered, than she arose to her feet, and rushed madly down the gulch; for she had caught the sound of the mutterings of the lynchers, as they gained the ledge, and were proceeding toward the cavern.

Colonel Andrews was chained to the spot.

That his child had gone raving mad, her brain being demoralized by the terrible occurrences of the past day, he fully believed. Then, by a powerful effort of the will, he recovered himself, and bounded on, down the gulch, after Arline; fearing that she would fall into some chasm, and be maimed for life, if not killed outright.

Filled with wonder and concern, he saw his daughter speed up the wall of the gulch, to the narrow shelf, her golden hair flying wildly as she ran. One false step, and she would have fallen far down upon the ragged rocks; yet, on she sped, reaching the shelf, and dashing madly toward the cave, guided by the light, that shot out of the rocky entrance, from the torches.

In horror and torturing anxiety, Colonel Andrews gazed upward as he ran; trembling to behold his gentle and lovely child in such a plight, and braving dangers which, under other circumstances, she would have shuddered at seeing one of the opposite sex attempt to overcome.

It was with great difficulty, that the colonel followed his daughter to the ledge, and the cries she gave, as she reached the cavern, and looked down into the dark abyss, shot through the old man's brain like shafts of red-hot steel. But he rushed onward, tottering like a drunken man.

The scene which he witnessed, as he staggered into the cavern, did not relieve his mind to any extent; for the deathly face of Arline—her senseless form now supported by Major Linwood—showed that her brain had again received a terrible shock, and the colonel feared she would become hopelessly insane.

That which struck him most forcibly, and caused him to shudder involuntarily, was the repulsive face of Lawrence Linwood, whose black, snaky eyes were fastened upon the face of the young girl, in gloating triumph, and fiendish exultation.

Not a trace of pity for her sad condition, was manifested in that gaze.

The light of the torches fully revealed that exultant and treacherous face; and Colonel Andrews did not forget its appearance, in after days.

For the time, the true character of the cowardly cur was shown plainly mirrored in his countenance; but none saw this, except the colonel.

As the latter came up, all the party looked upon him in sympathy.

A hush was upon all.

The silence of death had ruled in the cavern, since the blood-smeared verge of the dark chasm had been discovered; except when Arline had shrieked out the words recorded in the last chapter.

Those words had created a sensation.

The planters, with the exception of the Linwoods, began to think they had been too hasty; that they should have awaited the recovery of Arline, and listened to her explanation of the startling adventures, through which she had passed.

All saw that the girl felt for Leon Lisle, the deepest gratitude and regard; if not a stronger feeling.

This, the elder Linwood also realized.

The younger had, as we are aware, known it previously.

He now felt the greatest relief, that this dangerous rival was, as he thought, forever removed from his path; that he lay, a mangled corpse, down in the dark recesses of the mountain.

No one seemed to have any desire to speak.

In fact, no one cared to express, even if he could, the thoughts and feelings that ruled him.

The words of Arline amazed them.

They began to recall the evidences of the bravery and self-sacrifice that some one—un-

doubtedly this same Leon Lisle—had shown in the conflict with the monster bears. His horse had been killed in the conflict, and he had not waited to receive the thanks of the father, for saving his child's life.

Could such a youth be the friend of outlaws? It did not seem possible.

Had he wished to abduct Arline, could he not have easily accomplished his object before they arrived upon the scene?

Had he not drawn her into the cedars, thus once more saving her life, when she had been on the point of fainting and falling to the rocks below?

Had he not kept himself from being seen at this time to prevent any loud demonstrations of praise and gratitude? for he was of a retiring disposition, as all very well knew.

If this had been the case, it was terrible, to think that he had met with such a fate while in the performance of a noble act.

Had they found him alive, they would at once have decided that he merited only a short shrift; but, now that they believed him to be dead, their sympathies were started upon another track.

And with this change of opinion came a change in regard to young Linwood. All recalled his interest in the maiden, his motive in gaining her favor, or the favor of her father, by any and all means. His treachery of character now came to the front in the minds of the planters, and they cast furtive glances at his face and began to note his actions. Their distrust of him increased.

Major Linwood, convinced that Arline had become infatuated with Leon Lisle, was exceedingly relieved to know that the latter had been removed by death beyond the power of marring the plans he had made for his son.

The new impressions that had been made upon the other members of the party were not expressed in words, and occupied but little time. For all this, the faces of many, illumined by the torches, revealed quite truthfully the thoughts and emotions which ruled them; and the younger Linwood, cunning and watchful as a fox, saw that the tide of opinion had set in against him—that he must be very circumspect, or he would himself be in danger of the rope with which Leon Lisle had been threatened.

Colonel Andrews, overcome with the anguish which he could not express, clasped his daughter in his arms and ran back, into the open air.

There he seated himself upon a rock, and holding the maiden to his breast, caressed her tenderly for some time in silence. Then he asked for some water, for which one of the planters hastened.

Not until this call for water to revive Arline, did it flash upon Lawrence Linwood's mind that the maiden, who had at once by a few words changed the views of the planters, would be likely to give such an account of the gallant acts and kind attention of young Lisle, upon her recovery, that she would arouse the wrath of all against him as the cause of Leon's death.

He had seen how suddenly the men changed toward him in looks and manner, and how like a flash he had by a few well-chosen words, infuriated them to frenzy—to an insane desire to hang his rival! His blood now chilled in his craven heart as he thought of the possible effect Arline's next spoken words might have.

He decided that, after all his plotting, he was in, if anything, a less favorable position, as far as gaining Arline as his wife, than before he had dragged her from the ledge.

Then another thought darted through his brain—one that fairly caused him to tremble.

He knew that Arline had caught a glimpse of his face among the cedars, as he clutched her, and he remembered that she had shrieked out at the sight of him; and, although he considered, at the time, that her brain was benumbed by the terrors through which she had passed; and the danger in which she then was of falling into the gulch, yet it now occurred to him that she might recall the fact that she had recognized him.

Should she reveal this, he would be in a most perilous position. He would be proved a liar; and, more than that, a murderer—all knowing that he had a strong motive in the deception, and in removing Leon Lisle.

Instantly, as all this came upon him, Lawrence signaled his father, and both stole off, down the shelf, unnoticed, while the planters were watching the attempts of the colonel and Captain Gordon to revive Arline.

"What, in the fiend's name, have you got in your head now, Lawrence?" demanded the elder Linwood, with no little show of anger.

"You have played a bold game, like a man, and swept the board; and now you want to be sneaking away, when we ought to stay, and hear what the girl has to say when she recovers. What new idea have you now?"

This was said as the father and son reached the bed of the gulch.

"Don't talk so, father," said the young man. "We must get away from here. Instead of sweeping the board, as you put it, I shall be

swept from the earth, or jerked from it at the end of a rope, by that fickle crowd!

"Don't you see that they have turned against me? If Lisle was alive now, they'd worship him as a hero. Those words of the girl did the business; and she'll turn the tables more completely, when she regains her senses, or I'm greatly mistaken. I must tell you all."

"Father, she knows it was I that pulled her from the edge of the shelf into the cedars, and not Leon Lisle! There, you have it."

"Good heavens! Lawrence, why did you not tell this to me secretly, in the first place?"

"You have made a fool of yourself, when I thought you had accomplished wonders. Hang you? Of course they'll hang you!"

"We must get away from here, and dash off homeward at once."

"I'm not quite such a fool as that," was the answer. "They would point for our plantation, the first thing. We must seek a quiet place in the range, and there camp, waiting until the excitement blows over."

"Come on! Our absence is not, as yet, noticed. Lead your horse slowly around the bend, mount, and we will give them the slip!"

Father and son were soon speeding down the gulch, having escaped, without being observed by the planters.

Arline had, by this time, partially revived; but she spoke not a word, and was carried, in her father's arms, to the camp.

The planters accompanied them, all very much surprised at the disappearance of Major Linwood and his son; but, as none cared to breathe their suspicions as to the truth of the younger Linwood's story, and their change of opinion, and doubts as to Leon's having intended to abduct Arline, there was indignation expressed in regard to their departure.

They rather reasoned, that the major, who was known to be very watchful and solicitous about his son, imagining him to be quite feeble, and liable to die at any time—that the old man had insisted upon Lawrence returning to camp.

This reasoning originated from their knowledge of the major's ways; and from having noticed that Lawrence had, several times, been seized with a trembling, while in the cavern.

The presence of the Linwoods in any party, was not considered greatly agreeable; hence the others were more relieved than offended at their abrupt disappearance.

Arline was immediately placed under the care of her old nurse, who had accompanied the expedition to look after her charge; and the hunting party were forced to remain without their host, as the maiden was in a high fever, and her father's anxiety was fearful.

The following morning, Arline being delirious, necessitating an immediate return to her home, the colonel, almost distracted, accompanied her. The fair sufferer was laid upon a couch, in a Dearborn wagon, which sped as fast as two fine horses could travel, arriving at the Andrews plantation just after midday. How different the return from the setting out!

The family physician, upon being summoned, and attending upon Arline, announced to the stricken and agonized father, that his daughter was threatened with brain fever.

Thus the grand farewell gathering had proved to be far from a joyful occasion to Colonel Andrews.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CAPTURE.

THERE were not two more terrified wretches in all Virginia than the Linwoods, father and son, as they hastened from the gulch.

The danger, which the younger of the two imagined, with good cause, to threaten death in an ignominious manner, seemed to grow nearer and nearer at each bound of his horse. The father, too, was appalled and horrified at the peril of his son, and impressed more and more by the abject terror which he manifested, was indeed in a most pitiable frame of mind.

The young man imagined that he heard the yells of the pursuing planters, who were close behind him lashing their horses onward, and the self-same noose that had so nearly been prepared for the neck of Leon Lisle seemed to be floating in the air in front of him, ominous of the dread and ignominious death he so justly merited.

The flap of a night-bird's wing, the hoot of owls and the shrieks of panthers shot through his ears and into his brain like lances of ice-cold steel. They caused his blood to chill, his flesh to quiver and his form to shrink down in his saddle, while his breath came and went in hissing gasps. His head twitched from one side to the other, and his snaky eyes shot glances of horrible suspicion on all sides.

Every movement, every look of Lawrence Linwood was keenly watched by the horrified father, whose torture was now terrible.

He believed that Lawrence, his only child, all that he had to care for, had become insane.

His affection for his son, unworthy though he had always been of it, was the only redeeming trait in the old major's character.

Not for an instant did he doubt the danger, or that it was fast approaching, for not only

did he place implicit confidence in Lawrence's perceptions and knowledge of mankind, but he had witnessed the wild fury of the planters, their mad desire for the life of Leon Lisle, when all they could bring against the brave mountain-boy was mere suspicion. This, too, was in the face of the brave deeds which he had before done, and the evidences of which were before their eyes. They were brave, but impulsive.

They had been led to a sudden resolve to lynch Leon upon a few well-chosen words spoken by Lawrence, and he now felt that they would be thrice maddened when they should hear the assertions of Arline as to the perfidy of the young man who had given false evidence against an innocent rival through jealousy. And that, too, after stealing upon the youth, felling him to the earth with a club, and then dragging him in a senseless condition—him who had risked his life thrice over to save Arline from the savage beasts—into a dark cavern to the brink of a fearful abyss, into which he had rolled to his death in the first moment of his recovery.

All this would be known, for Lawrence had cried out, in his excitement and terror:

"I left the club, all bloody, at the mouth of the cavern! The girl's dress was torn on the jagged rocks and in the cedars, and my own clothing, and that has left plain trail."

"The proofs, backed by her evidence, will be damning. I am lost! lost! lost!"

These last words the wretched young man had hissed into his father's ears, as he gazed despairingly and wildly into his frightened visage, causing the old man to shrink from him and shudder with horror.

Then he would glance back over his shoulder, and listen with bated breath, as he drove his spurs rowel-deep, expecting to discover the cavalcade in hot pursuit, and clamoring for the blood of his son.

The start had been made without any great fear of pursuit, or of immediate danger; but no sooner did the pair commence galloping, than the speed of their horses, the weird moonlit scene, the rugged walls that towered on either side, the realization that they were flying from those who but now were their friends—or seemingly so—but now enemies who sought revenge, who sought justice for murder done—only upon one it was true, but the life of that one meant the life of another—all this, together with the fact that their pursuers were this time in the right without question, caused the fugitives to become more and more terrified, more positive that their peril was great, and that a shameful death threatened one, and a dishonored, lonely, loveless life the other!

The clattering of the hoofs of their own horses seemed to be sounds caused by the steeds of their pursuers, and the very moon seemed bent on their destruction, shining, so they fancied, thrice more bright, and appearing to avoid patches of clouds, that she might show their fleeing forms to those in pursuit of them.

Their horses snorted and plunged, and flecks of foam flew from the jaws of the poor animals, while blood dropped from their flanks—for at every bound, spurs were driven home without mercy, for well the riders knew that their pursuers would be merciless.

Thus on until, out from the mouth of the gorge, dashed the half-insane, wholly terrified pair, their colorless and repulsive faces, now more cadaverous than ever. In short, they were more like two mounted corpses than living riders.

Jerking wildly his bridle rein, Lawrence turned his steed up the range, his father following him; and both shooting glances backward, up the mouth of the gulch.

Just then, the prolonged shriek of a panther rung out from the mountain-side, causing them to clutch at their saddle-horns for support, for they were in such a demoralized state of mind, that they believed the sound to have come from one of the advance pursuers, who had caught sight of them, and given that wild cry, as a signal.

On they went, along the base of the range toward the north; for they had not dared turn south, in the direction of the camp, or east, toward Lynchburg, and their home.

The very thought of the town, near which they resided, caused a shudder of dread. It seemed to add to their terror, appearing a mockery to their present condition and position; and considered in the present, from the past, when they had chosen it as their retreat, as a hiding-place from justice, for crimes committed—now it seemed ominous of the fate that eventually would overwhelm them.

On, hour after hour, at headlong speed, they rode; then both shot into a dark and narrow gulch, passing gestures, ghastly movements of their hands, to signify each his inclination to end the terrible race.

The horses were now blown, and could go no further at such speed; and the riders, themselves, were in a very exhausted condition, having experienced a reaction within a very short time, upon deciding that they had distanced their pursuers, and were safe for the night.

Not a word had passed the lips of either since they left the big gulch; each dreading to hear

his own voice. The lips, tongue and throat, of each, were now parched with thirst.

Yet, not at any time, had there been a pursuer on their track, except such as had been conjured up in their unnatural imagination.

Both sprung from their horses at once, and the panting, foam-covered animals were secured to dwarf pines; too fatigued to crop the grass at their feet, although they had not had an opportunity to graze, since the previous morning.

"Thank fortune, we escaped them!" exclaimed the major, in a low voice, so hoarse that his son started in alarm, thinking that some stranger had spoken.

"Heavens and earth! Lawrence, what are we to do? Are we to be hunted like dogs, in this manner?"

"Has your bungling outlawed us? Are we to be beggared, ruined for life, through your infernal foolishness?"

"You can return to the plantation, father. They cannot molest you. I admit that I was very foolish."

"Do you believe they will be eager to hang me, after the excitement has subsided?"

This was said in an humble and beseeching tone; the young man standing, leaning against his horse, seeming unwilling to leave the animal, to whose speed he believed that he owed his life.

"I shall remain with you, my son—die with you, if need be."

"Perhaps it will blow over. It may be that we have been needlessly alarmed, and might as well have returned home."

"What, in the name of wonder, can we do in this wild spot? We shall starve, or be torn by wild beasts. Oh, that it should come to this!"

"Any death for my son, but the rope! It is horrible, too horrible!"

"Yet, if young Lisle rolled into the chasm, surely they cannot say that you murdered him!"

"You are right, father, I declare!" returned Lawrence, in a more natural voice, and one which was expressive of hope.

"They cannot prove that I killed him. Even that club will be a witness in my favor. There are no brains upon it, and it is not a very heavy weapon."

"The fact that there is blood on the rocks also shows that he struggled and rolled about, after I left him in the cavern."

"Yes," said his father; "but they do not stop for proofs, or reasoning. They hang a man first, and then look up the evidence."

"But we must seek a rocky shelf, or some other place that will be secure from beasts, and try to get some sleep. I am greatly fatigued, as well as tortured with hunger and thirst."

"We can find water and game in the morning," returned Lawrence, more hopefully; "and perhaps things may not appear so bad to us, after a good sleep."

"For myself, I will say that I have been more like a lunatic than a sane man, since I saw that bear killing the negro."

They now proceeded to remove the equipments from their horses, feeling more relieved each moment, as the ebbing of their excitement and terror, and freedom from danger for the time being, caused them to gradually resume more natural thought and reason, and to decide that they had magnified their peril.

It was, to the fugitives, quite dark in the narrow gorge, for the reason that they had been riding in the bright moonlight; but, as their eyes became more accustomed to the semi-darkness, the rugged points of the scene became outlined, weird and wild, in every sense of the words.

Upon casting their saddles upon the ground, at the base of the gulch wall, on its northern side, both the major and his son straightened themselves erect and whirled around, facing the south wall; for the click of hoofs upon the rock, and the rustling and whistling of branches, struck their ears.

At the same time their own horses gave out feeble neighs, in recognition of their kind.

The very instant that the two men turned rapidly about, a rough voice, in peremptory command, was heard in the gorge.

"Drap on yer knees lively, an' toss yer trigger-pickers up'ard!"

"Ye're our meat, an' we'll take your pelts clean off from head ter heel, ef yer starts any durned nonsense!"

Never were human beings more dumfounded or filled with more terror, as this command struck their ears.

The click—click of pistol-locks sounded ominously at the same time, as from clumps of pines, at the foot of the southern wall of the gulch, bounded six horses with as many riders, who jerked the animals to a halt in the middle of the gulch.

They then leveled their deadly tubes at the heads of the two fugitives.

Here was fresh and unexpected terror.

Down upon their knees dropped the trembling wretches in helpless cowardice and fear.

Thus they stared helplessly on the line of roughly-attired riders, while upward they thrust

their arms, in obedience to the order of their captors.

The tableau was pitiable and contemptible.

At first the major and his son believed the lynchers were upon them; but when they reflected for a moment on the speech of the man who had so dazed and terrified them by his command—this, and the manner in which the strangers were attired, convinced the Linwoods they had been mistaken.

"Hal! hal! ha! Ho! ho! ho!" laughed the speaker. "Hyer's a couple o' rich roosters fer us ter pick, er I'm a liar, boyes! Jump ter dirt, Jim an' Bob, an' skewer ther cusses up. Thar's two purty peart nags, but they've bin run ormighty hard."

"Say, what in thunderation hev yer bin runnin' yer critters thet-a-way fer, yer durned cantankerous coons?"

At the orders of this man, who appeared to be chief in command, both the major and his son were securely bound hand and foot.

Both of them were still speechless from sheer terror.

The outlaw chief resumed:

"Won't wag yer tongues, hey? Waal, I reckon we uns kin find a way ter make yer sling gab when ther time comes. But this hyer party doesn't perpose ter linger hyer-a-ways more'n a few fleetin' winks, more er less. Roost 'em on thar nags, pards, an' we'll glide from this sorter easy like."

Without a word further, these orders were literally obeyed. The poor, fagged-out horses were saddled, and their owners secured upon them. Their weapons had previously been taken from them.

In less than ten minutes after the voice of the leader of these strange, rough night-riders broke on the still air, Major Linwood and Lawrence, both terrified nearly to death, were hurried out from the gulch, and then down the range.

They were taken over the same course that, as fugitives, the now captives had ridden so wildly, not knowing what awaited them, only fearing the nameless terror that threatened to follow them.

Soon they turned into a dark defile in the range.

Lawrence Linwood and his father perceived, as soon as they were able to collect their scattered wits, that they were in the power of the dreaded outlaws of the Blue Ridge!

All hope now vanished from their hearts.

CHAPTER XIII.

HEAPING COALS OF FIRE.

LEON LISLE did not proceed east in the direction of the open plain, when he started for his home. Knowing every mountain-path, he walked along the eastern side of the range, amid rocks and pines, and up yawning chasms and gulches, as he could in this way save many miles of travel.

Rough and rugged rocks strewed his way, yet he pressed untiringly on, regretting much the loss of his steed, Surefoot, upon which for many months he had traversed these mountains.

On he went until near noon, when he could see the plain stretching afar toward his home. His mountain travel would soon be over.

Glad was the youth of this, for he knew that these fastnesses concealed those who held deadly enmity toward him—the outlaws of Blue Ridge.

The suspicions of the planters in regard to the connection of Leon with these outlaws were entirely unfounded. Had they resided a little further north they would have known that the youth had been the means of the capture and death of several of the band, the foraging expeditions of which extended, for the most part, among a line of plantations on a branch of the James river.

One of these estates belonged to Lemuel Lisle, the father of Leon. He was a wealthy and respected old resident of the county, and was a widower, having one child, this one son.

Suddenly our young friends came to a halt. Amazement, mingled with gratification, was stamped upon his face. There was, also, not a little concern for his own safety.

And well there might be.

Directly below where he stood, there was a circular space, of perhaps an acre in extent.

This was covered with a rich carpet of grass, and watered by a large spring, that bubbled from the base of the cliff. It was bordered with pines of a richer green, and ranker growth than those less favored by the moist and rich soil.

It was a beautiful spot, but it was not that which attracted the attention of Leon Lisle.

Almost the first object that met his eye, was a favorite horse, of great value, and noted for speed and endurance. This, with a number of others, had been stolen from his father's plantation, some weeks previous.

The young man was greatly excited.

By accident, he had come upon the secret retreat of the Blue Ridge outlaws—the gang of Mountain Mose!

So far below was the vale, that the animals feeding therein did not seem half their natural

size. This fact caused smaller objects to be unnoticed by Leon; or, at most, but casually glanced at.

On closer examination, he saw two human beings; two men, who were evidently captives, or they would not be lying as they were, stiff and motionless, as if bound.

Leaving his saddle and bridle under a cedar, the youth, keeping close to the wall of rock, as far as possible from the edge of the ledge, proceeded with the greatest care down it for some distance.

The next glance he gave, showed that the two men were indeed prisoners; and that one of the outlaws stood near each, with a number of long, supple green sticks. A murmur of threats and oaths now reached him.

Little time was given to the captives, who, it was evident, had not satisfied the bandits in their demands; for yells of terror and agony came from them, and echoed among the cliffs.

Leon became furious with rage. He resolved to make an attempt to release the two men, and regain his horse and the other animals at the same time; although he well knew that it was a desperate undertaking, and with but little hope of success.

At all events, he would effect the release of the captives; who, for aught he knew, might be friends of his own. At such a distance, it was impossible to recognize them.

He felt that there would be a much better chance to succeed after nightfall, than now, in the broad daylight.

The moon would favor an escape to the plain, through the defile; and Leon at once set about making his way further along the shelf, which led him from the view of the outlaw retreat. He knew, however, that it would end in, or near, the bed of the gulch; the head of which was the little vale which Mountain Mose had selected for his retreat.

An examination of the ground, Leon knew would be of great benefit to him the coming night, should he succeed, even partially, in his attempt.

The cries and screams of the captives had lasted but a short time; the outlaws evidently only giving them a hint as to what they might expect, did they not come to terms. This relieved him, for the night, and the agonized cries of the two men gave him much anxiety. He began to fear that the fiendish bandits would flay their victims alive.

Having inspected the winding gulch to the outer plain, which occupied some time, as he was forced to move with great caution, thinking a sentinel might be posted at any of the turns; Leon, at last, returned to the spot where he had left his saddle and bridle.

Below him, in the retreat of the outlaws, everything appeared the same as when he had first discovered it. No one was in view, except the two captives, who still remained, secured to the trees, as before.

Although they must suffer more from being forced to stand thus, Leon knew that he could more easily rescue them, than when in their previous horizontal position. He now, therefore, began a study of the opposite side of the gulch wall, that he might be able to select his course.

That there was a cavern near the little valley, he felt confident; and that the outlaws were now feasting and carousing in the same.

Should they remove their prisoners to this, it would be impossible for him to rescue them.

This might be done when night came, and consequently Leon resolved that he would reach the fringe of pines at the base of the cliff, as soon after sunset as possible.

Having thus decided, he threw himself at length, to rest, and ponder upon his recent adventures. But his meditations gave him more pain than happiness. He well knew that Arline came near fainting, for no other reason than his apparently inexcusable and abrupt departure from her side; she having, evidently, anticipated great pleasure in introducing him as her preserver.

Rather would he have suffered torture, than cause the beautiful girl the slightest pain or anxiety; but he believed that, by remaining at her side, he would expose himself to open contempt and insult from her father, regardless of the services he had rendered.

Leon was also greatly pained, when he thought of the horror and anguish Arline had, and would suffer, from believing that he had met with a horrible death by falling into the fearful chasm.

He must, therefore, soon seek an interview with the maiden, and relieve her mind.

But there were jealous thoughts and feelings, too, that would get uppermost, when he recalled the sight of his idolized one, helpless, in the arms of the cowardly miscreant, Lawrence Linwood.

This last scene would be ever in the front; it would hang in the most prominent position in the gallery of his imagination, until he could avenge the dastardly and murderous attempt made by Lawrence upon his life.

Such were the young man's meditations, while he waited for the sun to hide his fiery face below the range. The time seemed to drag slowly.

But, at length, his waiting was at an end.

The outlaw retreat was in deep shadow, the horses being but dimly seen in the semi-darkness, which was partially dispelled, at one side of the little vale, by a half-circle of fire-light, which gradually blended with the gloom, that hid the captives from view.

This glow revealed to Leon the exact position of the cave of the outlaws.

He had never doubted that there was something of the kind, and he was rejoiced that he now knew its location; also, that it was on the opposite side of the vale from the captives. Fearing that the latter would be removed into the cavern for the night, Leon started at once down the winding shelf, picking his way, as before, with great care, until he reached the bed of the gulch. Then he proceeded to worm and crawl his way up the opposite side of the great chasm for some distance, until he gained a ledge, which he knew wound along the cliff-side, to a point directly over the pines, and quite near the unfortunate captives.

As stunted cedars grew along the edge of this shelf, Leon felt sure that he could avoid observation.

By this time the round, full, silvery moon rolled upward toward the zenith, from the eastward; but it had not as yet penetrated the little vale.

Below it, however, the gorge was flooded with moonlight.

The time was favorable; and, as the youth reached the position that he had marked out in his mind to descend, he heard loud laughter and ribald song, proving conclusively that the outlaws were enjoying themselves in a debauch. No sooner did Leon hear this than he darted down, and in a very short time, stood beneath the dark shades of the pines.

There was no time for hesitation.

Slipping his revolver to the front on his belt, ready for instant use, and then clutching his knife in a fierce grip, he parted the branches, and gazed out into the little valley. He found himself in front of the mouth of the cavern; but the inner chamber was some distance from the outer opening, through a long, arched passage, which descended abruptly, thus obstructing a view of the bandits.

Much to the disappointment of Leon, he saw that a sentinel sat at the entrance, rifle in hand, watching the captives, who were within ten feet of the pines. They had been removed but a few minutes before, from the trees to which they had been bound.

Under these circumstances a rescue without alarm or death to himself was next to impossible.

But Leon spent no time in thought; his course was plain. This sentinel must die, and that without the knowledge of his comrades. To decide was to act.

Immediately the youth stole along the base of the wall amid the pines, making a circuit to the mouth of the cave, and passing cautiously across the clear entrance. In ten minutes he crouched, knife in hand, behind a boulder within five feet of the outlaw guard.

As if to favor Leon, at this very moment the sentinel laid his rifle at his feet and began to fill his pipe with tobacco. Loud shouts and laughter continued to come from the cavern.

There could be no better opportunity than this.

The back of the man was toward Leon. To kill him seemed cowardly, but Leon knew that more than one foul murder rested at this mountain brigand's door, and that the entire gang were black-hearted assassins.

One desperate bound, and young Leon's left palm was clapped over the mountain outlaw's mouth, his head was forced backward, bending his body and swelling out his breast. Then up shot the bowie, the blade flashing in the glow of the fire-light, and then downward, crashing through flesh and bone to the buckhorn!

A convulsive, writhing, spasmodic twitching of the limbs and muscles, a wild clutching of hands at the one that covered the victim's mouth, was followed by the weakening arms slowly beating the air, as if warding off horrible shapes. This, with a series of gurgling sounds, ended the horrid, but necessary act.

The next moment the dead bandit lay in the dark shadow of the boulder that had served to hide the approach of the avenger. His weapons were in the possession of Leon, who stood but an instant, listening to the continued sounds of revelry.

He then strode boldly to the side of the two captives and cut them loose, saying, in a clear and commanding voice:

"Quick, men! I have killed the sentinel and we have not a moment to lose. Here is a rifle for one of you, and a knife and revolver for the other. Come! our lives depend upon instant action. If you can't walk, crawl down the gulch. I'll cover your retreat and stand between you and harm until you can defend yourselves."

Leon could see that both the men were ghastly pale; but it was too dark to distinguish their features. In fact, the youth paid but little attention to their appearance, for his eyes were fixed upon the mouth of the cavern.

Rubbing their wrists and ankles for a moment only, the released captives seemed to be almost speechless with abject terror and astonishment at this latest act in the drama.

They partly crawled, and partly rolled along the ground, to, and out of the entrance to the vale.

Leon walked backward, with presented rifle, and having the other weapons ready for instant use.

The young man felt much self-gratulation, and little wonder that he did, at having accomplished a humane deed, at the risk of his life.

Little did he dream, how short a space would elapse, before he would regret most deeply having performed such an act of heroism.

Still less did he imagine that he was fated to behold those who had, on the previous day, taken active parts in the startling life drama, in which he was to be the star—that he was to behold, in that gulch, two persons, one of whom he despised and detested more than he did any other being on earth—the other, one whom he loved more than his own life; ay, more than even she, to him, dimly uncertain and undefinable life hereafter, beyond the gates of the Great Mystery.

CHAPTER XIV.

AGAIN IN THE TOILS.

SLOWLY backward crept Leon Lisle, glancing now and then behind him on the creeping forms of the rescued captives; who, at every movement, gave out half-stifled groans of agony.

Fifty yards' progress would bring them to the point where the gulch turned eastward, when the bright full moon would illumine their way. Then, as Leon reasoned, the captives would have recovered sufficiently to walk without much pain.

The youth then purposed to return, and endeavor to equip three horses, spring upon his old favorite, and leading the other animals, gallop down the gulch to the bend, where the two men could each mount a horse. Then, they could all escape at headlong speed; proceeding singly, in the middle of the gulch bed, where a path had been cleared of stones, probably by the outlaws themselves.

Neither of the rescued men had spoken a word. Indeed, it was not to be expected that they would, under the circumstances.

No indications, pointing toward a discovery of the absence of the sentinel, or the captives was detected as they went on.

Some little time passed, and Leon, becoming impatient at the slow movements of the rescued pair, suddenly whirled half about, thrust his revolver into his belt, and grasping an arm of each, said, as he assisted them to a standing position:

"Come on, my friends! This will never do. Delay is death! Any moment a score of those demons may be upon us. Secrete yourselves as soon as you reach the bend, where the moon is shining so brightly, and I will endeavor to secure horses for you and for myself.

"This is no time to talk, but to act, and to act lively. There! Before you is plain travel in the light of the moon. Hide in the shadow of the first boulder to the left and I will return for the horses. If I am killed or captured fly for your lives up the side of the gulch, report to my father, and he will, under your guidance, lead a party of planters that will avenge me, and annihilate the band of Mountain Mose.

"My name is Leon Lisle, at your service. Take care of yourselves until my return."

The young man said this rapidly, meanwhile assisting the trembling captives onward, both of whom seemed to be exceedingly weak and broken; indeed, almost powerless. Especially was this the case after their rescuer had given his name.

Watchful in his rear during this time was Leon, expecting each instant to be fired on by the bandit.

He therefore left the two men to proceed on as soon as they reached a point from which the gulch was lighted up, giving little attention to them. Their expressive trembling did not seem strange to him, if, indeed, he noticed it at all.

Half-turning as he released the arm of each, Leon again drew his revolver as he spoke the words that were last recorded.

He then strode on the back trail, nimbly at a moment's notice to let fly a fusillade with his revolver, having leaned his rifle against a rock at the time that he assisted the two men to their feet, and urged them onward.

Regaining this weapon he was about to continue toward the little vale and the cavern, when, to his utter amazement and concern, he heard the clatter of hoofs behind him and beyond the spot at which he had left the two rescued captives.

Instantly Leon again darted down the gorge, knowing that the further he got from the outlaws' cave the safer he would be, and the more assistance he could give to the men whom he had rescued.

Before he reached the bend in the gulch, however, he heard yells of vengeful fury in his

rear as well as the sound of men running down the gulch toward him. These were the outlaws who had been in the cavern, they having undoubtedly discovered the dead sentinel and the escape of the captives.

Leon began to feel that his position was now dangerous in the extreme.

He was hemmed in between two parties of the merciless mountain outlaws. Of this he had no doubt.

The approaching horsemen must belong to the gang of Mountain Mose, who had been out on a foray.

Would they discover the rescued captives?

The possibility, indeed the probability of this, caused Leon more anxiety than did his own desperate position.

However, self-preservation is the first law of nature, and rules us by instinct.

The youth darted into a thicket of pines.

The next moment five most villainous and murderous-looking outlaws dashed down the gorge, in the direction of the bend.

Leon stepped quickly from his covert and threw up his revolver.

One after another, in quick succession, five revolver-shots broke the awful stillness of the gulch, echoing in almost continuous roar, on cliff and crag, in gorge and chasm.

The forms of the bandits could just be seen, it being too dark to distinguish features twenty feet away.

With yells of terror, three outlaws fell dead in their tracks on the floor of the gulch, the other two crawling into the pines, badly wounded.

Hastily reloading, Leon ran toward the bend, determined to protect the two men whom he had rescued. He had only reached the border of the moonlight and secreted himself, when the sounds of other horsemen approaching were heard; and soon, bounding up the gulch at terrific speed, came the most fierce and desperate party of men that could well be imagined.

They were only six in number, but of the most fiendish and ruffianly appearance.

Leon glanced toward the boulder, where he had directed the two ex-captives to conceal themselves and await him, but they were not to be seen.

Loud yells from the two wounded bandits up the gulch sounded continuously. These were heard by their approaching comrades, who urged their horses onward in their fury, being also much alarmed at hearing the reports of fire-arms near their stronghold.

Leon hardly knew what he must do next. It was soon decided for him, however, and in a most undreamed-of manner.

The outlaws were obliged to ride in single file, and the last had not been noticed by him.

When he did glance at them, his face became convulsed with anguish, and his eyes flashed with a murderous light as he again clutched his weapons.

Leon Lisle was now more dumfounded than ever.

And it was no wonder that he was thus affected; for before his eyes, her flowing hair hanging over the arm of a bandit who held her, was Arline Andrews, whom he had believed to be in the camp of her father, and by this time quite recovered.

There she was in the arms of a burly bandit, her face upturned and flooded with silvery moonlight, which caused her to appear more deathlike.

Not for an instant did Leon now ponder upon what should be done.

Breathing a vow that he would rescue the fair girl, and collecting all his strength, he made ready for a desperate fight against great odds. His rifle at the first shot brought down the leading outlaw, and then like a madman, with revolver and knife in hand, he dashed into the moonlit section of the gulch, yelling to the men whom he had rescued to fight for their lives and assist in saving Arline.

During the time that Leon was hidden from their view, the attention of the outlaws was fastened ahead, drawn by the yells of the wounded; they knowing that the reports of fire-arms had proceeded from some distance in their front, between their present position and the cavern. Consequently, they were dumfounded, at being attacked, before they had cleared the moonlit portion of the gulch, and by but one man.

Well had Leon chosen his position.

He felt that to take one false step doomed him to death; and Arline, to a worse than death.

He sprang from the screen of pines upon a long rock that bordered the path, along which the bandits were speeding; it being some two feet above the path, thus giving him an advantage in his daring onslaught.

Down went the leader, the rifle of Leon crashing his skull like an egg-shell; and, before the second outlaw could bring his weapon to bear, he, too, fell a corpse from his horse.

Then Leon executed a totally unlooked-for movement, and one which saved his life.

Hurling his rifle straight at the head of the third outlaw, as the latter pulled trigger, the youth sprang from the rock, directly across the

path—bullets cutting the air where he had stood an instant previous. He had drawn his revolver at once, and also his knife; and, instead of attempting to slay the next outlaw in the line, he darted past both, to the last one—the one who clasped Arline.

Half-turning, he quickly fired two shots at the affrighted outlaws he had passed, who were now spurring madly up the gorge.

Loud yells of agony followed these shots; but, an instant after, pulling trigger for the last time, Leon Lisle clutched the appalled bandit, who held Arline, and jerked him to the earth, being careful to have the maiden fall against his own breast, and then to the sword, without injury.

Then his bowie flashed in the moonlight, and the last of the outlaw gang was hurled, with sickening thud, against the rocks.

Grasping the bridle rein of the horse, as the animal was about darting up the gulch, the youth raised Arline tenderly in his arms and sprung upon the rock; whence he vaulted easily into the saddle.

Without even glancing into the poor girl's face, Leon whirled the horse half about, heading down the gulch, and drove spurs home; while cries of agony and vengeful yells sounded on all sides.

All this occurred in a few moments.

Leon's movements had been electric-like, and his success little less than miraculous.

Madly the horse dashed down the gorge.

Again had Leon Lisle saved Arline Andrews! Scarce more than twenty yards, however, had the animal galloped when out from behind a boulder sprang two human forms.

One clutched the bridle-reins and brought the horse to its haunches, at the same time that the other grasped an arm of Arline.

Leon had not been prepared for this.

Not only this, but the sight of the two men thus barring his way—apparently as enemies, for one of them leveled a rifle at his head—dumfounded him.

Both were naked to the waist, their faces corpse-like and repulsive, and their hair like tow. One had black and treacherous eyes that glared into his; the other had lusterless and fishy optics.

This latter, the elder, held the horse and clutched the young girl; the black, snaky eyes of the former glanced along the rifle, which was aimed at the young man's head. And he knew them!

Before him were the two men whom he had at the peril of his life saved from the outlaws!

They were, as he saw at a glance, Major Linwood and his dastard son, Lawrence!

So sudden, and so totally unexpected had been the sounds of approaching horsemen from down the gorge, and this alarm followed close by an advance of outlaws from the vale and toward the bend; that, with the fearfully unequal conflicts which had followed, had so overtaken Leon, both physically and mentally, that he felt suddenly unfit even for thought.

The appearance of the two men who had been rescued by himself, with the manner and actions of vengeful enemies bent upon his death—this almost paralyzed him, his mind being further bewildered by the reflection that he had risked life to rescue the man of all men whom he detested—the one who had attempted to murder him in such a cowardly manner, and who was again seeking his life!

Before Leon could frame a word or make a movement in defense—before he could even decide, so dumfounded was he at so many startling events following each other in so quick succession, whether he was awake or dreaming—a blinding flash signaled his banishment, as far as thought went, to oblivion.

This came from the rifle pointed by Lawrence Linwood.

The handsome face of Leon Lisle was upturned for an instant to the moon, his hat fell to the earth, and a little stream of blood trickled over his white brow. Then his blood upon Arline was relaxed, and he fell backward from his horse to the earth, where he lay, as devoid of sense as the rough rocks beneath his form.

A fiendish, triumphant laugh shot from the lips of Lawrence Linwood—a laugh that caused even his hardened father to shudder.

At the same moment a riderless horse dashed down the gulch, galloping at once to the side of the animal that had been bestrode by Leon, and terrified by the smell of human blood.

Catching the bridle-rein, Lawrence placed it in his father's hand, saying:

"Mount, father! Mount for your life, and spur deep! Fortune favors us. We'll win the game, or die in the attempt!"

The voice of the dastard was unnatural and husky; and, as he spoke, he sprang into the saddle that had so recently been occupied by Leon Lisle, wound his left arm about Arline, and drove spurs. Major Linwood, too, mounted in haste, and galloped on, after his son, down the gulch, his whole form trembling as he rode.

Again, the golden tresses of Arline Andrews floated over the arm of the miscreant; the arm

that had twice been raised to slay one, who prized each hair on that fair head, more than the folds its tints counterfeited.

The arm, that had been raised to slay one of nature's noblemen, who had, at the risk of his own life, and within the hour, rescued him from peril unspeakable, clasping, in its polluting hold, the form of the angelic Arline.

And, back in the gulch, outstretched upon its rocky bed, lay Leon Lisle.

The moon's pale rays played over his ghastly, but still handsome face, and his broad, high forehead, now stained with blood—the ragged trail of a bullet, shown along his temple—and his glassy sightless eyes, fixed upon the bright and placid face of the Queen of Night.

CHAPTER XV.

INTO THE JAWS OF DEATH.

THUS, as we have described, lay Leon Lisle, while, at times, strange sounds proceeded from up the gulch—groans of agony from the wounded.

The bandits, who had been in the cave, were so much under the influence of drink, that they had fallen easy victims to Leon; using no judgment in their headlong ride down the gorge.

Those who had not been killed outright, had crawled into the dense thickets of pine.

The party, with Arline as their captive, had been greatly frightened at the sound of firearms in their front; fearing, that either their stronghold had been discovered, or else their comrades had become involved in deadly conflict.

These circumstances had greatly favored Leon, until the appearance of the two miscreants, upon whom he had every claim for assistance, which in place of receiving from them, he had been, as we have seen, shot treacherously from his horse.

Lawrence Linwood felt certain that he had made sure work this time.

While Leon thus lay, silent and still as the scene around him, another actor appeared upon the stage; one who would have caused an observer to shudder with horror.

This was a human being, as far as outward appearance went; but a most inhuman one in character and disposition.

It was none other than a wounded bandit, now upon hands and knees, his clothing tattered and bloodstained; while, to increase his hideousness, he held a bowie-blade between his teeth.

Slowly he crawled along the bed of the gully, toward the prostrate youth, and when he perceived him, his eyes became filled with exultant glee and murderous, vengeful fury.

Like a panther creeping upon its prey, the miscreant advanced, after he had reached a point where he discovered Leon's outstretched form.

He evidently had suspicions that others were in the vicinity, for he kept well in the shadows of the pines and boulder.

One glance at this mountain outlaw would decide an observer that he was bent upon avenging the death of his comrades, and his own wounds, if any opening presented itself.

Nearly to the spot where Leon Lisle lay, had the hideous ruffian arrived, when a low moan issued from the young man's lips and a convulsive shudder shook his frame.

Instantly the outlaw halted; his flashing eyes, amid their frame-work of tangled hair, filled with murderous triumph. This was but for a moment. Then, with hasty movements, he crawled onward, until he reached Leon's side.

Bending over the face of the youth for an instant, the bandit gave a snarl of satisfaction, swinging one leg over the recumbent body, and sitting astride of it, his knife now in his hand.

Truly horrible was the appearance the wretch presented, as he raised his bowie in the air, the blade gleaming in the moonlight, its point directly over Leon's heart.

An insane thirst for blood and revenge flashed from the fiery eyes of the cowardly assassin—for a revenge that would be too tame, too meager, as his actions proved, to slay his victim in his then unconscious state. For he thrust his left hand into a side pocket and drew out a flask.

Removing the cork of this with his teeth, he still kept the glittering steel poised.

Raising the flask to his own lips, he drank a deep draught, and then poured some of the liquor between the lips and upon the brow of his intended victim, a fiendish grin all this time contorting his features, and merging gradually into a low laugh.

Moans now burst from the lips of Leon, and he began to writhe, as if struggling with some dread and monstrous thing; trying by a herculean effort to cast off the numbness that chained his powers and senses. His breath now came and went in a gasping manner.

At length his mind seemed to assume its natural functions, his eyes opened slowly, as if the lids were controlled with much effort, and his gaze became fastened upon the repulsive face of the miscreant who bestrode him.

Silent, as if carved from stone, sat the outlaw.

His eyes were fixed upon the face of his intended victim in insane joy and triumph.

Through the brain of Leon, darted, like a flash, a realization of the near past; the appearance of this man assisting him to decide where he was, and his present prospects.

His glance then wandered, from the face of the outlaw, to the bright bowie-blade.

Again, the fiendish laugh of the ruffian was heard. His lips curled away from his gleaming swine-like teeth, and he raised the knife higher.

At that very instant, another human form, knife in hand, shot directly over a long rock, which lay within two feet of the assassin, and caught him suddenly by the throat and the right arm.

Both rolled, in deadly conflict, free from Leon, who sprung to a sitting posture; great beads of cold sweat standing upon his forehead.

In a moment's time, the youth had passed through a most fearful ordeal. Great had been the strain upon his brain, not yet entirely recovered from the shock of the bullet, that had glanced along his skull, in that brief space of time, while he had stared into the eyes of the hideous brute, who had been about to murder him.

It had seemed an age.

As he now struggled to a sitting posture, bracing himself by placing a hand on the rocks on either side, the scene before him was not only horrible, but bewildering. It was a great mystery, as well; for the two men, who were in such fierce conflict, were of the same general aspect and attire, both being smeared with blood, their dirty clothing in rags and tatters, while each was positively brutal in expression.

That both were members of the band of Mountain Mose, Leon was confident. And, in this, was the enigma.

Why had one outlaw prevented his comrade from slaying him? This was a puzzle to Leon, but it was not long to remain so; for, as he gazed, the bandit who had darted over the rock, gained the upper side in the fight, and bestrode his adversary, in the same way that the latter had done with himself.

The position of each was precisely the same, even to the upraised knife.

"Dang, an' double dang yer, Bloody Bill!" snarled Leon's rescuer, furiously. "I've gut yer now whar yer can't squirm. Crawl onter young Lisle, an' knife him, when he hed bin shooted, an' war clean gone, would yer?"

"Crawl onter ther squarest white boy in Ole Virgin', would yer? Knife ther lad, I knowed when he war a kid, an' I war squar' myself, would yer? Wa-al, I sh'd cackle consider'ble ef ye gut any furdur thet-a-way, when Sim Simons war 'roun'!"

"I never hes went back on a pard, straight er crooked; but I sw'ar, Bill, ye're an 'or'nary coward, an' no pard o' mine!"

"Spoke a pray", Bill; fer yer can't meander ther same y'arth with Sim Simons. Yer hes ter skip 'crost ther range, ter Tophet, an' thar's no crawlin' outen ther vardin'!"

Bill, as he had been addressed, lay panting with exertion and terror; for, well he knew that his pard would keep his word. And, as he became thus convinced, he became desperate; concentrating all his muscular power in one grand effort to release himself.

But the eyes of Sim were blazing with a light, that had in it no ray of mercy.

The latter, however, was greatly exhausted; and, as he knew nothing of the intentions of Bill, who had closed his tell-tale eyes, the effort was partly successful. Both again rolled over the bed of the gulch, toward the opposite side from Leon; each striving to plunge his knife into the breast of the other.

Leon staggered to his feet, resolving that he would put an end to the fearful fight, by shooting the brute who had sought his life; but, to his consternation, both the contestants suddenly disappeared from view, with shrieks of horror!

Catching up the liquor flask, which just then he saw for the first time, Leon drank a deep draught. Then, he walked, with tottering steps, for he was bruised and stiff, toward the point where the outlaws had last been.

Only a few paces did he go, when he reached the edge of a wide and dark chasm, at the very base of the northern side of the gulch.

Leon Lisle shuddered.

His would-be murderer, and his rescuer, had disappeared forever from the face of the earth!

Our young friend had now but a confused idea of what had transpired in the near past.

He knew that he had rescued the two captives from the outlaw camp, and that he had fought a most desperate battle with the bandits. That he had killed some of them, he felt assured; but this recent hand-to-hand conflict had chained his attention, through his anxiety for the one, who—outlaw though he was—had attempted to save him, and this had banished every other thought.

Who this man was, Leon could not imagine.

So overtaxed had been the young man's mind, and also benumbed from the concussion of the bullet, that he could not but feel relieved

at having been spared from witnessing any more of the terrible conflict. His brain now became stronger, and he was soon able to throw off all thought of the last tragical occurrence.

Leon Lisle seated himself upon a rock, concealed from view; and, clasping his hot forehead with his hands, proceeded to unravel the tangled skein of his thoughts.

Not until then did he recall the fact that he had been shot by the two ungrateful miscreants, whom he had risked his life to rescue from the outlaw stronghold—Major Linwood, and his ruffianly son Lawrence!

There could be no mistake, for their figures and faces had been photographed on his brain.

He recalled, too, the fiendish expression in their eyes as they sprung to intercept and shoot him, in order, as Leon was well aware, that they might gain possession of Arline Andrews.

Leon hardly dared think of the poor, much-tortured girl, as he feared that the anguish occasioned by too much thought in regard to her would unfit him for the task before him.

The presence of Arline, a captive to the outlaws, did not seem so strange after all.

The band on a foray had chanced upon her at the gulch, when, probably, the main party of the planters had been to the little cavern to inspect it, and to gain more positive proofs by the "sign" as to his own death.

That the Linwoods should have been previously taken captive by the outlaws, was, however, a puzzle beyond his power to solve. But his reasonings led him to presume that for some unknown reason they had separated from the cavalcade and had been captured by the bandits and taken by them to their stronghold, previous to the arrival of the party who had Arline in their power.

Fully determined that he would investigate the mysteries of the day and night, which had proved so startling and tragic, Leon Lisle arose and glanced around his lurking-place, neither hearing nor discovering anything that would interfere with his proposed plans.

He examined his revolver, reloaded the weapon and regained his rifle from where he had cast it in the fight. He then proceeded cautiously up the gulch, with a view of catching a horse and galloping down the range.

Leon passed the corpses of the slain bandits in the semi-darkness, hearing no sounds that indicated the presence of human beings, and was soon in the grass grown vale, where the horses of the outlaws, fully equipped, were grazing. The animals threw up their heads, gazing toward him, but manifested no further alarm, and, striding to his own steed, that had been stolen from him weeks before, he mounted and proceeded once more down the gorge. He did not care to inspect the cavern of the outlaws, for his mind was now wholly bent on the rescue of Arline Andrews from the dastardly Linwoods.

But as Leon spurred down the gulch, his horse snorting and bounding aside to avoid the bandit corpses that lay in his way, a spurt of fire shot from among the dark pines, followed by the crack of a rifle.

With a groan of agony the young man fell backward over the hams of his horse to the earth, striking the rocky bed of the mountain-gorge with a sickening thud.

The startled horse stampeded back to the vale where he had been grazing, and his ill-starred rider lay motionless!

CHAPTER XVI.

LEAVING NO TRACE.

MAJOR LINWOOD and his hopeful son, when Leon Lisle had assisted them nearly to that portion of the gulch which was lighted up by the moon, both stood for a moment, when they had reached the boulder to which he had directed them, and looked at each other in terror.

"By Heavens, Lawrence!" exclaimed the major; "but that was a narrow escape for you!"

"He would have shot you like a dog, had he known who you were. What is he—a devil? That we, who believed him to be lying a mangled corpse in the bowels of the mountain, should be saved by him, perhaps from death!"

"In the name of wonder, what does it mean? Is it really he, as he said it was? I could not distinguish his features."

"It is he," was the reply; "in the flesh, alive and strong, and able to mar all our plans. But, by all the fiends, there is one consolation left. They cannot now hang me for having murdered him!"

"You are a fool, Lawrence! Did I not tell you that they could not hang you for killing him, in any event? He rolled into that chasm himself, and there he must still be supposed to remain. He must never be seen again by any eyes except ours. Do you understand? He must die!"

"He is already dead to the world, and he must remain so. If he lives, our plans are frustrated. But come: we must get away from this infernal hole."

"I agree with you, father. I thought I should

drop in my tracks. I trembled from head to foot when he told his name.

"I thought his voice was familiar; and it was lucky that we felt so weak and helpless we never spoke to him.

"By St. Jago! To think that we should be rescued by Leon Lisle! Ye gods—what next?"

"Nothing worse, I trust, than we have of late experienced," said the major. "I propose that we next— Good Heavens! What is that?"

"Run for your life!" cried Lawrence. "Run and hide! Hasten, or we are lost! A party of horsemen—outlaws I believe—are coming to the gulch!"

The two villains darted into a pine thicket beyond the boulder, where Leon had told them to secrete themselves in the first place.

Crouching closely to each other, the father and son peeped out from their covert; but the clatter of boots sounded from some distance down the defile to the eastward.

Hardly had they realized this fact, however, when they clung to each other in increased terror; for the sharp crack of Leon's rifle sent a thrill of dread through them, followed as it was by the rattling discharge of revolvers, yells and groans of agony.

Then, from down the gulch, galloped the bandits; and the trembling cowards caught a view of the cavalcade before it reached their vicinity.

"Look, Lawrence!" directed his father, in a hoarse whisper. "By all the fates, there is Arline Andrews, a captive to the outlaws!"

"She is lost! Our schemes are ruined, and if we escape with our lives we may be thankful. Curses on Andrews, and his hunting-party, I say!"

Lawrence appeared not to hear a word of this whispered harangue. He bent forward, his body braced by his arms, and his face frozen upon the golden tresses of Arline, which lay over her captor's arm.

Just then, like an avenging god, Leon Lisle sprung upon the rock, and brained the leading outlaws. Lawrence Linwood knew well what had nerved the arm of his rival, and fired him to fury, giving him the strength of many men for the time.

He had seen Arline Andrews, and was battling to save her!

Jealous fury now took the place of fear in the caiff's breast.

He saw a possible opening to retrieve all that had been lost. He saw that, by instant action, he and his father might gain possession of Arline; and he could again play the part of a gallant rescuer, and this time secure the gratitude, not only of the maiden's father, but of the maiden herself.

Catching hold of his father, he jerked him to his feet, saying rapidly, in a low voice, that had in it a tone of command:

"Brace up! The game is in our hands at last. Bound forward, when I give the word, and grasp the rein of the bandit's horse. Support the girl, at the same time, and prevent her from falling, while I shoot the outlaw and young Lisle.

"Look! By heavens, he's won the game and swept the board! He has her, but we'll take him in out of the dew, and confiscate his winnings, you bet!"

"No botch-work, dad, or we are lost!"

"Do as I have said, and we are O. K. The girl is mine, and Leon Lisle shall stay dead, this time. I swear it!"

The dash was made, as the reader knows, with success. Leon was left for dead; and Lawrence Linwood, with Arline clasped to his breast, dashed at full speed down the gulch, toward the plain, the major following. Both were jubilant, for they had outwitted Leon, and sent him to the land of shadows; gaining possession of Arline, and having a fair show of getting back to the camp, and there receiving the highest praise and commendation from all.

No fear had Lawrence now of being a victim of Judge Lynch; for he had formed another fiendish plot while on the run. This will be best explained by his own words.

"Father!" he called out, as they reached the open plain and galloped toward the camp, "I propose that we state that young Lisle was not killed at the cavern; but that he escaped and joined the outlaws. That he then dispatched some of these outlaws to abduct Arline, and others to capture us.

"We will also assert that we freed ourselves, gained weapons and horses, and shot down several of the outlaws, thus rescuing Arline Andrews.

"We can say that Leon fought like a fiend, on the side of the bandits, to prevent the girl from being released, but that he was shot dead.

"To prove all this, we will guide Colonel Andrews and the planters to the bandits' retreat, where the dead, among which they will find Leon Lisle, will prove our words true."

"You are a cunning one, Lawrence, and I am proud of you," said his father.

"I know you did make a great blunder in the beginning of this business, but you were excited then, and new to this sort of thing.

"Your plan now meets my approval. It is excellent. But you have probably lost sight of one important fact—that is, the utter prostration and danger of the girl. She may die!"

"Few women could go through what she has and live. She will have fever—her brain, you see, has been overtaxed, and she may not survive. Then, where will be all our plans?"

"We must take the chances," said his son. "We are playing for position, where none of our relatives live, and where nothing in regard to us is known. All is in our favor now. That confounded Lisle will never show up again. I made sure work of it this time."

"But, Lawrence, think of it! That young man saved our lives!"

This, the major said regretfully.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the young miscreant. "You are threatened with softening of the brain, dad! Going back on your record, I declare!"

"It is too good, though! If ever a man was used by his enemies as a tool, without any aim or plan to that end, it was Lisle."

"He cut loose our bonds, shot half a dozen of our captors, and then accommodately brained those who held our prize—very kindly placing in our hands, as it were, his last act on earth. It was a lively circus for awhile, and all the principal actors died well, in the grand finale."

"Hurrah! I hold the prize! The fates are in our favor, in place of being against us, as you thought just now."

"But, drive spurs! I'm nearly famished, besides being racked with agony. Curses on those devils who scourged us. I feel as if I had been skinned!"

Conversing in this way, the pair galloped on, poor Arline being more dead than alive.

Thus they rode, looking more like demons than men—like demons let loose to prey upon innocence and virtue; ready, as their hideous expression showed, to practice anything that was born of villainy and cowardice.

Cunning was stamped upon their unnaturally-formed features, and repulsive, parchment-like skin.

And thus, for the present, we leave them, hastening to gain the good-will, gratitude, and thanks of Colonel Andrews and his neighbors; to gain the name of heroes, by their plausible, and in fact, undeniable tale, of capture, fierce fight, and the final rescue of Arline.

After the departure of the Linwoods from the gulch, when Colonel Andrews was endeavoring to resuscitate his daughter from the faint into which she had fallen at the cavern, when she realized, by the blood and the awful abyss, as well as by the expressions on the faces of the planters, that Leon Lisle had fallen into the depths, thus meeting a terrible death—then, when Arline showed signs of returning consciousness, soon opening her blue eyes, with a strange and weary expression in them, her father's joy and relief were unbounded.

"Thank God, my darling lives!" cried out the old colonel, clasping his child in his arms, and unable to repress his emotions.

Murmured and heartfelt thanks burst from the lips of all who stood around.

Suddenly the maiden was seen to shudder.

The near past was becoming clear to her.

"Leon!" she exclaimed; "what has happened now? Oh, what a terrible day it has been!"

"Tell me, papa; do tell me! Is Leon Lisle, who saved me from those awful bears—is he, that brave young man, dead?"

The girl trembled in every nerve.

None felt equal to answering her.

Their silence, however, said all that words could have done.

Arline sprung to a sitting posture, cast a sweeping glance around upon the circle of sad and sympathetic faces. Then she caught her father about the neck, drew him toward her, and pressed her face to his breast.

Bursting into sobs, thus she lay, her long hair almost veiling her parent's form; his gray locks mingling with the golden tresses of his child, while his tears fell upon her head.

So grieved and pained were all the spectators, that they withdrew; slowly stealing down the gulch to the point where the ascent had been made to the ledge and cavern. Nothing, as if by common consent, was said. A glance, from eye to eye, told what was mutually felt.

When all were collected in a group, the strange disappearance of the Linwoods became, at last, the subject of conversation.

The suspicions of all were aroused.

Some advanced the opinion that there was much more connected with the recent events, than appeared on the surface; and it was generally felt that much could be told by Lawrence Linwood, that they had not heard.

The departure of the major and his son had not, at first, caused any great surprise, as all had been so deeply interested in poor Arline; and also pondering much over the fearful death of Leon Lisle.

Whatever might have been their conclusions, it is impossible to say; for they were inter-

rupted by a piercing cry, apparently from Arline.

Rushing back, up the gorge, the planters were stricken dumb with rage; for the only human being in sight, up or down the gulch, was Colonel Andrews!

The old man lay, stretched upon the rocks, just where they had last seen him; blood trickling through his gray hairs, and a terrible bruise upon his ghastly forehead.

Yells of fury, vengeful ejaculations, outcries of amazement, and expressions of dismay and sympathy were heard upon all sides.

Arline Andrews had, a second time, been abducted!

The golden-haired, angelic maiden was gone! Gone, and leaving no trace, or sign of herself, or of the miscreants who had captured her—gone, but whither?

And her aged father, silent as their surroundings, could tell them naught of her, or what had happened.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RETURN.

So strange, and tragic, and almost unaccountable, had been many of the events of the day and evening, that some began to be superstitiously inclined. They believed, to use their expression, that "the devil had broken loose," and was capering about the Blue Ridge, with a special spite against Major Andrews and his party.

But, Captain Gordon, who, through it all, had been the leading spirit of the company, began at once to see what could be done for the colonel.

It was not long, however, before the old gentleman recovered his senses, and looked around him.

Not one person in the party had the remotest idea what ought to be done under the circumstances. But a glimmer of the truth flashed upon the colonel's mind.

"For God's sake, gentlemen!" he exclaimed; "where is my daughter, my poor Arline? Do not tell me that she has been again torn from me!"

He glanced around him, as he spoke, and up and down the moonlit gulch. This inspection, together with the look upon the faces of his friends, proved the correctness of his sad forebodings. He felt that he had been wounded in the head, and that he must have been for some time unconscious.

"Did you see no one, while we were gone, colonel?" inquired Captain Gordon.

"I neither saw nor heard any one," was the reply. "My child was telling me about the bears, and that young Lisle had killed them, and rescued her. She was about to tell me who it was that dragged her from the shelf, where the young man had placed her, into the cedars, when I received a severe blow, and I know no more."

"I am now suspicious in regard to the story told us by Lawrence Linwood. It was not Leon Lisle, who dragged Arline from the ledge; for that would not have terrified her."

"And to make matters look more suspicious against the Linwoods," said Captain Gordon, "they both disappeared, as we brought Arline from the cavern."

"This looks bad, gentlemen; yet I cannot conceive why they should thus criminate themselves in this community. What is their motive?"

"Look here!" put in one of the planters. "You, none of you seem to reason in regard to this affair. Why did the Linwoods leave us, without a word of explanation, unless it was to lie in wait for another opportunity?"

"You may think what you please, gentlemen; but it looks that way. Colonel Andrews, I believe you were attacked by the Linwoods, and that it was they who bore your daughter away."

"Their motives, I cannot fathom. They may be plainer to you than they are to me."

The planters gazed at one another with strange and bewildered looks.

"If they have done this," began the colonel, in a most excited manner.

"The evidence is strong against them, I must say," asserted Gordon. "But they are mad to act in such a way. Is it not true that Lawrence wishes to marry your daughter, colonel?"

"Yes," replied the latter, hesitatingly.

"And you have not favored it, of course?"

"I have not; for I never liked the young man, and Arline, I believe, detests him."

"Then we have the motives, gentlemen," said Gordon. "Still, it is strange that they should jeopardize their lives in this way. It does not seem reasonable. There is something behind the scenes. But we cannot remain here."

"We must return to camp, get some food and sleep, and in the morning scour the range."

All agreed to this, but they found it difficult to persuade the almost distracted father to leave the spot. At length, however, they prevailed.

In the morning, the planters, in full force, returned with Colonel Andrews to the gulch, and inspected the same; but they found no trace

near the point from which Arline had been stolen.

They proceeded up the gorge to the scene of the struggle with the bears; there to find, that the animals had been skinned, the negro buried, and the saddle and bridle taken from the carcass of the horse.

This deepened the mystery still further, and gave them more food for thought.

They were confident that the Linwoods would not have removed the skins from the bears. They were not men who would go to that trouble, even did they desire the hides.

Neither would they have taken the equipments from the horse or buried poor Jumbo Jim.

Up to this time there had been nothing to lead the planters to suspect that the outlaws of the Blue Ridge had any hand in the strange occurrences in the gulch; but, after the inspection of the bend, with the result mentioned, all began to think that Mountain Mose and his gang had been in the vicinity the previous night.

If so, there was a probability that one of the bandits had assaulted the colonel and stolen his daughter.

This diverted suspicion somewhat from the Linwoods.

Indeed, they reflected the latter were not the men to risk their property and place their necks in a noose to gain an object that could not profit them financially. And, besides, it was one that they might gain without incurring any danger whatever.

More than ever were the planters now determined that they would scour the defiles of the mountains, and the entire day was passed in a fruitless search, no trace of the Linwoods or the missing maiden being discovered.

Colonel Andrews was nearly insane with grief and despair. He was utterly broken mentally, and seemed to have become hopeless.

A heavy depression and silence settled upon the encampment the second night of Arline's absence.

During the day a number of the party who had been detained on the day of the start arrived at the camp, and, to the eager questioning of their friends, replied that the Linwoods had not returned to their home.

This was thought by all to be very strange, and the old suspicions began to return.

If the major and his son had not abducted Arline, they must have had some connection with the outlaws—possibly had hired the latter to commit the crime—and were now hidden with the bandits in the mountains, keeping aloof in this way from Arline, and thinking to return presently to their home unsuspected. Then they could settle up their affairs, dispose of their property, and depart with their prize to some other section of the country.

All manner of reasons and opinions were advanced, the whole camp being astir until near midnight, when, as all were about to retire, two horsemen were discovered galloping down the range in the moonlight.

At once all gathered in a body on the north side of the camp, where the strangers must enter.

The strange appearance of these night riders caused ejaculations of wonder on every side.

They seemed to be nearly naked, and not only this, but they were ghastly as corpses.

One of them appeared to be bearing a burden, and, as they came nearer, all saw the golden hair of Arline Andrews flying in the wind of their speed and glinting in the moonlight.

A shout of joy and relief burst from all.

"The Linwoods, by Heavens! And they have got Arline!"

Thus cried out Captain Gordon.

"Thank God! Oh, my darling, my darling!" fairly screamed Colonel Andrews, as he rushed toward the approaching horsemen.

Here was another mass of mystery.

Again were the spectators lost in wonder.

Where had the Linwoods been?

Why were they in this condition?

How came they to have Arline?

What could their appearance, in such a fearful plight, mean?

These and other mental questions flashed through the minds of the planters, all becoming convinced that the major and Lawrence had not been concerned in the abduction, or they would not have returned, especially to bring back the maiden.

Captain Gordon had prevented the mad rush of Colonel Andrews, over the plain, to meet them.

The amazement of the planters was doubled, when Major Linwood and his son dashed into their midst; their horses panting, and covered with foam, and their own naked backs, lacerated, and smeared with dry blood.

The faces of the pair were more ghastly than ever, their long light hair was tangled, their hats were gone, and nothing of their attire remained upon their persons, but boots and breeches.

Both were wild and unnatural in manner and glance of eye, as if from having passed through some great danger; as, indeed, their condition proved beyond a doubt.

Arline lay, perfectly limp, in the arms of Lawrence; but her eyes were wide open, and she was staring, fixedly and strangely, into the face of the man who held her.

Instantly Colonel Andrews sprung to the side of Lawrence, with cries of joy, and clutched at the form of his daughter.

The young man gently lowered Arline into the arms of her father; but that same wild state was maintained, she keeping her eyes fixed upon young Linwood, and not noticing any of the others around her.

"Oh, spare her! Heaven spare her, and spare me!" cried the old colonel, in a voice of anguish. "She has gone mad! My child, my darling, is insane, and will die!"

"Father in Heaven, spare my only child!"

Tears flowed down his cheeks like rain, as he pressed the form of Arline to his breast; but she lay, passive and unmoved by his caresses, still gazing upward into the eyes of Lawrence Linwood, who shuddered as his gaze met hers.

For quite a minute the two wretched-looking men sat their steeds, breathing laboriously, and evidently suffering much pain.

The spectators looked at them in speechless wonder.

"Gentlemen," said Major Linwood at length, "we have been captured by the Blue Ridge outlaws, and lashed unmercifully by the miscreants, but we succeeded in making our escape."

"On our way from the mountain retreat of the bandits, we met in a wild gulch a party of the band returning from a foray and having Miss Andrews captive. We had secured weapons, and we secreted ourselves, ambushing the abductors, shooting some, and finally rescuing the poor girl."

"Here we are, but nearer dead than alive. We must have attention, food, clothing, and sleep; so please do not worry us to-night with questions."

"Miss Andrews is in a critical condition, and should be taken home at once, where she can have proper medical attention. Please assist us from our saddles, for we are benumbed and stiff."

This well-worded speech had the effect desired by the speaker.

His explanation, as far as it went, was not only satisfactory, but caused all to vie with each other in offering assistance. All felt guilty and conscience-stricken at having entertained suspicions against the pair, who had so suffered, as it was very evident, at the hands of the outlaws, and who had rescued Arline at the risk of their lives.

The Linwood stock went up above par.

The story of the major could not be doubted, for every evidence to convince them of its truth was before their eyes.

All was now bustle and excitement.

Colonel Andrews was in a most deplorable condition of mind, and few could look into the wild eyes of the angelic Arline and see her unnatural manner—she showing no recognition of even her own father—without a trembling lip and tearful lid.

The captain, under such a pressing necessity for immediate action, soon became himself again.

He ordered the ambulance mules to be hitched up, and a blanket-couch to be prepared for the unconscious maiden.

In less than half an hour after the totally unexpected arrival of the strangely conditioned and appearing trio, the colonel sat beside his daughter, who had been placed in the ambulance, and the vehicle was speeding toward the Andrews Plantation, the black driver having been instructed not to spare the lash.

Major Linwood and Lawrence, meantime, were not neglected.

Their wounds were attended to by an old negro woman, clothing was given them, and they were furnished with much-needed food.

They then lay down to sleep, as did all in the encampment; and soon after all the anxiety, grief and wonder of the day and night were banished, as they sunk into slumber.

CHAPTER XVIII.

COWARD CONSCIENCE.

EARLY the following morning, Major Linwood requested an interview with Captain Gordon.

The latter hastened at once to grant the request.

As he entered, Lawrence was wrapped in blankets, appearing to be asleep, and his father was in a sitting posture, upon his couch. He appeared to be quite weak and suffering.

"Captain," he said, in a low voice; "I am not in a state to enter into any lengthy details in connection with the adventures of myself and my son."

"In explanation of our abrupt departure yesterday, I can only say, that we saw a marked change of sentiment apparent in the party, after it was found that young Lisle had rolled into the chasm. We could not help seeing that the sympathies were rather with him than with Lawrence."

"That was, perhaps, natural, under the circumstances."

"But, from the first impulse to hang Leon,

if you found him alive, we decided that you might proceed to the same unjust extremity, in the case of my son; charging him with Leon's death."

"Therefore, we rode off, intending to encamp by ourselves, until our friends could take a more dispassionate view of the matter. We traveled some distance, riding at last into a gorge, where we intended to camp; but six outlaws spurred from the pines, and captured us, binding us upon horses, and taking us, by devious ways, to their mountain retreat. There we were bound, and treated as you have seen."

"After beating us unmercifully, to compel us to say where our money and valuables could be laid hands upon, they left us, still secured, and began a debauch in their cave. One of their number was left at the entrance, on guard."

"This bandit fell asleep, and we succeeded, after many efforts, in releasing ourselves. Once free, Lawrence slew the sleeping sentinel, and we appropriated his weapons, and started down the gulch."

"The outlaws, however, soon discovered their dead comrade, and our absence, and hastened in pursuit."

"They were intoxicated, and we shot four of them dead, and wounded the other two; but, as we were congratulating ourselves upon our victory, we heard the clatter of hoofs down the gulch and secreted ourselves, reloading our weapons. We had secured other arms from the dead outlaws, and so were well provided for defense."

"To our great astonishment, we soon saw six more brutal-looking men, riding up the gorge, which was now nearly as clear as day; and recognized, among them, none other than the young man whom we supposed to be dead, and for causing whose death, we had felt assured that you all meditated hanging Lawrence!"

"You don't mean to say that Leon Lisle is alive, and with the outlaws?" burst out Captain Gordon, in the utmost astonishment.

"I do most solemnly assert, that Leon Lisle was alive, and was with the band of Mountain Mose! Not only did we behold this astonishing sight, but we discovered that the young man held in his arms the daughter of Colonel Andrews, whom we had last seen safe in her father's arms at the big gulch, and with all your party around them!"

"This was sufficient to arouse the superstition that lies latent in all men, and bewilder us to such an extent as to endanger our lives."

"But we knew that to hesitate was death—that when the outlaws turned the bend, they would discover their dead comrades, and hasten to search the gulch. And we were too weak to think of escaping on foot."

"Infuriated at the base treachery of young Lisle, we both decided that we would rescue the colonel's daughter, at all hazards. We had the advantage, and we opened fire at once."

"Only two retained their saddles, when we ceased firing, and they, I think, were mortally wounded. My son shot Leon Lisle, caught Arline, and sprang into the saddle, while I secured another horse; and we made our escape down the range."

"You now know all; and what I wish is, that you send the wagons back, break up this camp, and Lawrence and myself will lead you to the outlaw retreat. There, the proofs of my story will set aside all doubts."

"I will do as you say, and at once, Major Linwood. You and your son have proved yourselves true men; but it is due you both that the general public should know of your great service to them, in having rid the earth of so many of Mountain Mose's desperate band of followers."

"I am dumfounded at learning that Leon Lisle is the one who murderously assaulted Colonel Andrews, and made off with his daughter."

"It is all most mysterious, especially when we consider that Leon appeared first as the rescuer of Arline from most deadly peril."

"But we will talk this over some other time, major. I hope you are not in great pain. I will send Aunt Dinah to attend to your bruises; and then order the breaking-up of camp, when I can explain matters to the men."

"Thanks, captain! Do so at once, and please have some brandy brought for me. We are both very weak, having suffered more than I can describe."

Captain Gordon left the tent, and by his manner no one would have supposed that he had the slightest doubt as to the truth of Major Linwood's story; but the captain had his suspicions nevertheless. He felt that there was something left out, and something added.

These suspicions were founded upon his having detected that Lawrence Linwood was feigning to be asleep; his eyelids quivering, and even at times opening, when he supposed the captain could not gain a view of his face.

There was no one who ever came in contact with the Linwoods, who was not conscious of a feeling of aversion, and in consequence was much prejudiced against them both.

Their appearance was certainly not in their

favor, and this feeling was stronger with Captain Gordon than with many others. Hence the distrust he felt on perceiving that Lawrence, who would naturally be supposed eager to corroborate his father's story, kept so sedulously in the background.

He resolved, however, that he would confide in no one, but would watch the father and son closely during the trip of investigation.

Two hours after the interview which has been recorded, the long train of wagons was proceeding on the return trail; none but the original party of planters, who were present at the big gulch during the recent startling occurrences, remaining behind. The hunting-party had proved not only a failure, but a disastrous affair; long to be remembered by many with sorrow and regret.

None of those now returning down the James river knew the object of the planters in remaining behind, Captain Gordon having imposed secrecy upon his friends.

After the departure of the captain from the tent of the Linwoods, Lawrence sprung quickly to a sitting posture, and hissed in his father's ear:

"I shall not go to the gulch with Gordon and his party! They, every man of them, detest us, and distrust us. You told a good story, and told it well; but I can see that in our haste we have made as big fools of ourselves as we possibly could, although we prided ourselves upon holding the best cards and playing them for all they were worth from the start."

"What in the devil's name do you mean?" demanded his father, trembling and beginning to show some apprehension.

"I mean that we stand in a more dangerous position than we did before the rescue of Arline, and that I am in danger of the rope if I return to the scene of the fight!"

"Explain yourself, Lawrence, for Heaven's sake! What link in the chain has been left out?"

"A number of them," was the reply, "should the keen-eyed men of the party study the 'sign' in the gulch. In the first place—though I never thought of it until a few moments ago—some of those wounded men may be alive, and who can tell what evidence they may give?"

"Then, again, I can't help thinking that Leon Lisle was not born to die early in life, or he would not have escaped rolling into the chasm, or in his fights with the bears and the bandits."

"I was a fool not to have sheathed my knife in his heart. I saw where my bullet struck him in the temple; but there is a possibility that it was only a glance shot."

"I tell you, I smell hemp! Danged if this expedition hasn't been an unlucky affair all around, but especially to you and me, dad!"

"I shall not go to the gulch, for they would string me up at once, if they knew all. Just think of what the true state of things is, did they but know it! Ye gods! If they should find it out, they would torture me to death!"

Major Linwood groaned in anguish and terror.

Then, in a gasping voice, he asked, humbly:

"For Heaven's sake, Lawrence, what is to be done?"

"You can pilot the party, and I'll feign to be too weak and ill to go. When you are beyond view, I'll saddle my horse, gallop home, collect all the money and valuables, hiding them in the hollow oak, in case of unforeseen emergencies; retaining a sum sufficient for present wants. I will then fly to Richmond, in disguise, and keep shady until you can join me."

"Sell the plantation as soon as possible, and we'll skip to New Orleans. There we can remain under assumed names, for a while; and then settle in Texas."

"We'll keep track of old Andrews, and hold the same power over him; for you are not in any danger, as you have not been implicated in any attempt on the life of young Lisle, or even in the affair of Arline."

"But you must warn Andrews, in any event, that he must not leave at once for Texas. He hates the Lisles, and you can easily convince him of Leon's guilt; no matter what others may say to the contrary. That is the programme."

"They can't harm you. They will hang me, if the whole truth comes out. But, one thing I swear for the hundredth time; and that is, Arline Andrews shall yet be mine!"

"Not only this, but Leon Lisle, if he has again escaped death, shall die by my hand. I'm just getting worked into this business, and henceforth I shall leave no 'sign' to betray me!"

"Lawrence, if what you fear is the case, you are indeed in great danger. If young Lisle be alive, he will follow you to the ends of the earth, and avenge his wrongs. He will have Arline as his wife, if it be possible for him to do so. We stand upon the verge of a precipice."

"You are right. You must not go with us to the gulch. They can bring no proof of crime against me—nothing, except a desire to protect you, by giving false testimony. I will act upon your advice. But I must keep near Andrews, and keep, as far as possible, all true accounts of this thing from him."

"Work your points cunningly, dad! Play your cards right, and we'll win yet."

"By St. Iago! I wouldn't care to live—I'd prefer to be hanged, rather than lose Arline. She shall be my wife, or I'll have more blood than Leon Lisle's. I'm a desperate man now!"

"This has changed me. Henceforth I'll crush down all cowardice, all fear of man, or devil! If I am to be hanged, I'll do something to merit it. Woe be to those, who attempt to do me harm! Make your explanations to the planters at once, in regard to my being unable to go with the party."

"All right, Lawrence!" said the major; "but calm yourself, my son—all will end well. I am confident. Colonel Andrews is in my power. He is but a roll of clay in my hands."

"Only do not be seen in the settlements. Go home to-night, and depart before morning. The wagons are ready to start. Proceed down, on the south side of the river, avoiding observation. I will inform the planters that you are too unwell to join us."

"Take a drink of brandy! It will strengthen you. I need some myself, more than I ever did."

The sun had passed the meridian; when, with Major Linwood as guide, the planters rode out from the deserted camp, and up the range.

But one tent remained, and inside, upon his blankets, lay Lawrence Linwood, relief and exultation expressed upon his repulsive features, as he gazed under the flap of the tent, and saw the cavalcade disappear around a spur of the Blue Ridge.

But he did not long play the opossum game.

In ten minutes more, the miscreant was mounted on his horse, and was dashing eastward, toward his home.

This lay on the south side of the timber that marked the course of the creek, which was the beginning of James river.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE MOUNTAIN STRONGHOLD.

THE sun was low in the western sky, when the cavalcade of the planters entered the gulch, which led to the outlaws' retreat, Major Linwood in the lead. Captain Gordon had ridden by the side of the major, during the trip, but there had been little conversation between them, or indeed among any of the party. A heavy depression seemed to rule all.

Upon entering the gulch, the major could not repress a convulsive shudder; but he was playing a bold game, upon which much depended.

If every tongue in the gorge was silent, his son would be a hero, instead of a hunted outlaw.

He had, however, a presentiment that all would go wrong; that his deception would be exposed, and when he entered the dismal gorge, all hope would be left behind. He felt too, that he was in personal danger, notwithstanding his son's assurance to the contrary.

He knew how impulsive his neighbors were, and he began to fear that, should all be discovered, they might proceed to violent acts—perhaps hang him—especially when they should find, upon returning to the camp, that Lawrence had fled.

Consequently Major Linwood was in no very enviable frame of mind, and upon entering the gulch he became more excited, and began to tremble in his saddle as they approached the scene of the desperate rush of Leon Lisle upon the rock, to train the mounted bandits, and rescue Arline.

"What is the matter with you, major?" asked Captain Gordon. "Are you afraid that we may run into an ambush? Do you think that there may be more of the outlaws, that have arrived here since your conflict?"

Major Linwood felt relieved at having a way opened to explain his manifest fright and apprehension, and he replied quickly:

"I did think that such might be the case. Do you know the number of Mountain Mose's band?"

"No; nor does any one else I reckon, who does not belong to the organization. What distance have we to travel up this gulch?"

"We shall be within sight of the covert, where my son and I fired upon the mounted outlaws and young Lisle, at the next turn in the gorge."

"Keep your rifles at full cock, gentlemen, and ride forward as compactly as possible. We may have trouble ahead."

Thus ordered Captain Gordon, turning in his saddle, and facing the planters in the rear.

He then threw his rifle into the hollow of his left arm, ready for use.

Major Linwood drew his revolver, holding the same cocked; but the barrel of the weapon was describing scalloped circles in the air, in his quivering grasp, and his dim watery eyes were fixed in front of him, in gloomy apprehension.

As Captain Gordon and Major Linwood turned the bend, the horses of both reared upon their hind hoofs, and snorted with terror, striving to whirl and retreat; but they were spurred onward. They had caught the scent of blood.

Buzzards were perched by hundreds upon the

jutting crags, and many were soaring in wide circles high in air; only kept from their ghoul-like feast by the wolves and jackals that were snarling over the corpses of the outlaws.

It was a horrible sight.

Instinctively, the two men drew rein.

As they did so, the crack of a revolver sounded from up the gulch.

"Spur on, men!" yelled Gordon; "the wolves are tearing the wounded!"

That revolver report went through the brain of Major Linwood, like a red-hot shaft of steel.

It proved that some one was still alive—perhaps some witness, who would prove the perfidy of himself and his son. Rigid, he sat his horse, until the planters dashed past him around the bend.

Recovering himself, he saw that his remaining in the rear would cause suspicion and distrust; he therefore spurred forward, well knowing that he could not escape if he would. After all, it was probable that but one outlaw was alive; and the evidence of such a villain could have but little weight. Not only so; but an outlaw of that gang would have no object in revealing the heroism of an enemy; nor would he care to acknowledge that one man had slain so many of his comrades.

Like lightning these thoughts flashed through the mind of the unprincipled old man; and, a moment or two after, he rode rapidly into the midst of the planters, and then to the front, as before, near Captain Gordon.

The wolves and jackals slunk away into the thickets or darted away into the clefts of the walls of rock, while the air, overhead, was filled with the flapping of the wings of the affrighted buzzards and ravens.

When Major Linwood dashed to the front of the massed planters, he noticed that not only had all jerked their horses to a halt, but, that they were pale, and their eyes were fastened at a point ahead of the cavalcade.

He shot one glance toward the front, the point, he remembered, from which the first sounds of conflict had proceeded, when he and his son had crouched, appalled and terrified, in the pine thicket.

That glance revealed a sight which caused the old dastard to tremble from head to foot. His pale face became more cadaverous in hue, and his breath came and went in short gasps.

And no wonder was it that all were so strangely moved, and especially Major Linwood, for, just in their front, and not twenty paces from them, at different points, lay the half-devoured corpses of three outlaws, torn and mangled beyond recognition—half a dozen snarling wolves, with blood reeking jaws and paws, just darting into the pines up the gulch, their white fangs displayed in threatening ferocity at their human foes, who had disturbed their feast.

But this was not the cause of the strongly-evincing emotion manifested in their faces and glance. The objective point was in the center of this fearful scene.

Outstretched, in a little triangular space, clear of bushes and rocks, lay a human form, the head and shoulders resting upon a stone.

The form was that of a young man of fine physique, but his broad breast was covered with gore, from a bullet wound that was plainly visible.

Near him lay three dead wolves, and a fourth, yet quivering in the last agonies, was stretched across the limbs of the wounded man.

As the planters caught a view of this shocking scene, the eyes of the wounded man were open; but, as they halted, they saw the lids slowly close over the hazel orbs, from which the soul light had nearly vanished.

Captain Gordon sat, for a moment, in his saddle, after the halt, and dazed by the terrible sight; he then cried out, as he caught sight of the trembling man near him:

"Major Linwood, I see that your story was mainly true. But Leon Lisle, the affliator with outlaws and abductor of innocent maidens, still lives, although I will wager my life that he has prayed most fervently for death, a hundred times since the bullet of your son laid him where he is!"

"Gentlemen"—turning to the planters in the rear—"dismount, and secure your horses near the bend. There is an opening here, I think, for a close investigation of this outlaw retreat, and something to be done, with and for, any who may have survived."

The old major seemed powerless, either to speak, or to move a limb.

Captain Gordon drew a flask from his saddle bags, and hastening to the side of Leon Lisle, poured some liquor, in a tiny stream, between the lips of the young man; after which, he bathed his forehead. The planters gathered in a circle around the point of interest, all staring at the blood-stained form before them.

There was the ragged track of a bullet along the temple, beside the gory gun-shot wound in the breast. A little pool of blood on the rock-bed of the gulch, told of the weakness and nearness to death that were his; and the dead wolves, that lay near, spoke plainly of the terrible torture of mind and body, during the long night, and nearly an entire day that he had lain upon the rocks—most of this time in dan-

ger of being torn by the ferocious beasts of that mountain gorge!

Had there not been several corpses near at hand, which served as a feast for the wolves, the planters felt that nothing except the bones of Leon Lisle would have been found by them. As it was, it could only be said that he still lived.

Major Linwood still seemed incapable of speech or motion, as the planters gathered in a circle around Captain Gordon, and the senseless Leon.

All at once, the former started erect, and asked, in a peremptory manner:

"Did you not say, major, that your son shot Leon Lisle in the head?"

"Yes," came the answer, after some hesitancy, in a sort of gasping whisper.

"Also," continued Gordon, "that he was shot, back yonder, around the bend, when he was with the mounted outlaws, who were coming up the gulch toward this point, and after those bandits had been slain who came on foot from the cave above here?"

"Yes," in the same strange voice, as though the tongue answered instinctively, and without being controlled by the will of the speaker.

"Then, how do you account, gentlemen"—casting a sweeping glance around the circle—"for Leon's being here and wounded seriously in the breast?"

"The bullet that was fired by Lawrence Linwood, as asserted by his father, struck young Lisle on the head, and you see the track of the ball is there to prove it. But the bullet glanced.

"My idea is, that Leon recovered, secured a horse, and then started down the gulch, when he was shot in the breast by some outlaw who had escaped death in the fight, for the marks of iron-shod hoofs are here, grinding upon the rock as if the animal had whirled in fright at the report of the gun.

"Besides this, the young man's head is bruised, and his shoulders as well, by a fall upon the rocky bed of the gorge from his horse. Examine and see.

"If my theory is correct, it does not appear that Leon Lisle was with the outlaws as a friend. Had such been the case, one of the outlaw gang would not have shot him.

It seemed as though these words of Captain Gordon had suddenly aroused the old major, for he urged his horse nearer and cried out, in a more natural voice, revealing, however, his fear and desperation:

"You are wrong, Captain Gordon; quite wrong in your deductions and hasty conclusions. It could not be otherwise.

"It would be perfectly natural for any survivor of the band to kill Leon, in revenge for his having been the direct means of the death of so many of their number. Don't you see?"

"As to the presence of Leon Lisle at this point, it is a mystery to me; but your supposition, captain, seems quite reasonable, in regard to the matter. All I have to say is that I believe Leon Lisle, who lies there, evidently at the point of death, bribed the bandits of the Blue Ridge to waylay myself and son, and that, from motives of revenge originating in what had occurred at the big gulch.

"I say, too, that he abducted Arline Andrews for his own vile purposes."

"Ye're a dog-goned ole tow-headed, fish-eyed, white-livered, mummy-faced liar. I takes my affdavy on that.

Every man turned at once, in the utmost astonishment, in the direction from which these strange words sounded.

They had come, in a gruff voice, from a thick clump of pines, on the north side of the gulch. And there, in plain view of all, was the head of a ruffianly-looking man.

It was thrust from the branches near the earth, as though he was upon hands and knees.

The sharp eyes of this strange apparition darted defiant glances at the group.

Clearly he was no coward.

The portion of his skin that was visible was singularly white; but his mouth and lips were wholly hidden in a chaparral of bushy beard and mustache.

Beast-like and horrible was the head, and the words that issued from it, caused the greatest excitement and amazement among the planters. And not only that, but the utmost terror and dread to Major Linwood!

CHAPTER XX.

TRUTH IS MIGHTY.

"COME out! Show yourself, and explain your words and presence, or we'll riddle you with bullets!"

Thus ordered Captain Gordon.

"Blaze away!" was the retort: "an' then, I reckon my leetlespeech'll be a riddle, from now on till Gabr'l's horn toots! Hit takes a power o' yer ter buck ag'in' one ole he mountain skipper—dang'd ef hit doesn't!"

"Fact air, I'm willin' an' eager ter be bored, fer I've hed 'bout enough o' tortur' ter make me sick of this yere worl'—dod gast hit! Ef yer hes any whisky, I'll try an' crawl out, on one leg an' two paws; fer that's all I kin raise.

"I hes somethin' ter say, webbe, that yer'd like ter hear."

Captain Gordon ran forward to the pines, and placed the neck of his flask in the upturned mouth of this strange being.

"Now, crawl out!" ordered Gordon. "If you can't use your limbs, we'll assist you."

"I reckon I kin make ther rifle, arter ther p'ison gits ter shoot through me."

As he said this, the shoulders and arms of the hideous human appeared, and he began, slowly, to crawl out from the pines, while groans of agony came from his lips.

One leg was dragging upon the ground, the bone being broken between knee and hip.

It was torturing to the beholders; although they were confident that he was one of the band of Mountain Mose, they could not help feeling sympathy for the wretch, and admiration for his exhibition of nerve and fortitude.

At a gesture from Gordon, three men stepped forward, and lifted the sufferer upon a blanket, placing his broken limb in a natural position; but the exertion and the agony were more than he could bear, and he lost all sense, and was for the time free from his terrible sufferings.

The fractured limb was much swollen and discolored with indications of inflammation. One of the hunting party was a surgeon, who chanced to have his instruments with him. Quickly opening his case, the doctor at once asked for assistance, and in a very short time had amputated the leg of the senseless outlaw. He then said to Captain Gordon:

"He could not have lived long as he was, and he has suffered a thousand deaths. He has one chance in a hundred, now that his leg is off. We must do what we can for him."

"Doctor," called out Gordon, a moment after, from the point where Leon lay, "come this way, please. We have made a great mistake, I fear, in not giving our attention to this young man first.

"He is as far above that wretched outlaw as the sun is above and superior to the earth."

"I am not as heartless as you think, Captain Gordon," returned the doctor, "for I extracted the bullet from young Lisle's breast, a few minutes ago, when your attention was upon that crawling outlaw."

"Thank you very much, doctor. And is the wound dangerous, think you?"

"Leon is shot through the upper lobe of the left lung," was the reply. "The wound is not dangerous, if he receives proper care.

"I tell you he is, in my judgment, a brave, fearless, honorable young man, and one who would do to tie to."

"I have had pretty much the same opinion of Leon," said the other; "until within a short time, I never believed that he could be connected with the gang of Mountain Mose. There have been some things, however, that have pointed that way lately.

"But, according to the words of the outlaw there, he has something to communicate that will not, I judge, be very complimentary to the principal witness against Leon. You know whom I mean. But where is the major?"

"I have not seen him since I examined young Lisle's wound. Perhaps he is with the crowd there. I see his horse there still."

"Where is Major Linwood?" called out Captain Gordon, in a loud voice.

All started, and a confused hum of voices that merged in rage, astonishment, and threats, alone replied to him.

He had left his horse for the very good reason that it would have been impossible for him to have "levanted" on the animal without attracting notice. That he had silently stolen away was evident.

All was now confusion and indignation. But upon this broke a terrific shriek of mortal terror, that rung and echoed up and down the gulch, from the point where the fight between Leon and the bandits had occurred.

Shriek after shriek rent the air, and but a moment between each, as the planters all rushed to the spot. All were confident that they were uttered by Major Linwood, but could not account for their cause.

Soon those in advance reached the spot.

Breaking through the pines, half a dozen of the planters came upon a startling tableau.

Captain Gordon rushed to the front, as his neighbors halted in horror.

There was a small, clear space in the clump of trees, and in the middle of this lay Major Linwood, his eyes fixed upward and his mouth open in horror. His lips were of a blue tinge, and his face was frightful to look upon.

Astride of the major was a brutish-appearing man, evidently one of the outlaws—his clothing torn and spattered with blood. He had been wounded, much as Leon Lisle had been, but further down in the breast, from which in his agony he had torn the shirt.

Poised in the air, over Major Linwood, he held a long and glittering knife, raised to be plunged in the old man's heart. The blow had evidently been withheld only that he might enjoy the terror of his intended victim.

The sudden appearance of the planters, with leveled revolvers, now drew his attention. He felt that he was doomed.

It was plain that the major, in his stealthy

flight, had fallen over this wounded man, who now held him at his mercy.

"Drop your knife, or you're a dead man!" yelled Captain Gordon, drawing bead upon the outlaw.

"Just es yer ses, cap'n," returned the villain, as he tossed his bowie to one side.

"I'll swar, though," he added, "this cowardly ole whelp needs killin', es had es a durned p'ison rattler!"

"Who are you, and how came you here in this condition?" inquired Gordon.

"I'm reckonin' yer knows ther hull biz, an' thar ain't no call fer gab. Fac' air, I'm a leetle too fur gone ter make a talk; but I tended ter spile this yere cuss, afore I died.

"Gentlemen, assist this man up the gulch, and lead Major Linwood along also. His attempt to escape from us looks bad, and we must detain him until we can investigate matters."

Trembling in every limb, the major was now led back to the place where lay Leon Lisle, and the outlaw whose leg had been amputated. The bandit was brought along as well, but he kept up a defiant expression.

The doctor, meanwhile, had administered stimulants to both his patients, and they had recovered, as much as the nature of their sufferings would allow.

Leon lay listless, with a strange, far-away look in his dark eyes, that were now somewhat dimmed and lusterless, as were those of the wounded outlaw near him.

"Waal, dang my skin, ef this ain't kinder sociable!" said the bandit last captured. "That's all what's left o' yer, air hit, Bud! Reckon we quits ther game tergether. Hit's consolin'."

The other cast a wandering look upon him and returned carelessly:

"How dy, Bill? Take a lay-down, fer I see ye're bad lurted, like myself."

Bill was gently lowered beside his comrade.

Major Linwood was obliged to stand in front of the trio of wounded men, exhibiting all the terror and dread that ruled him.

Brandy was poured down Bill's throat, and the surgeon probed for the bullet but without success, his patient saying:

"Hit's no use, Doc! Let ther lead stay thar. I'm hooked clean through."

"I'm bad all over, but I'll take my affdavy I never done es low an' cowardly a trick es ther or'nary ole critter, ther pertends ter be squar' an' civerlized! Hey, Bud?"

"I'm bettin' on thet, Bill!" was the answer.

More liquor was now given them, and then Captain Gordon said, impatiently:

"Now then, Bud and Bill, as you call yourselves; we know that you belong to the band of Mountain Mose, but we want to know all you can tell us of the capture and escape of Miss Andrews, and of Major Linwood and his son!"

All the planters gathered close to hear the narrative of the outlaws, which was soon told.

It appeared that Bud had been in the cave, and was one of the first to rush down the gulch. He knew that Leon Lisle had slain the sentinel, and liberated the captives. He had seen his comrades shot down by Leon, and had himself been wounded and crawled into the pines.

Bill had been one of the party who had captured Arline, and had witnessed her rescue by young Lisle. He had also seen the major and his son rush upon Leon, from a covert, which proved they had not been in the fight, up the gorge, and around the bend.

He had seen young Linwood shoot Leon, then clutch Arline, mount, and dash away down the gorge with the maiden in his arms, the old major following him.

The attempted assassination of Leon, and its interruption by another bandit, both meeting death by falling down the chasm, had also been observed by Bill.

Bud also acknowledged having shot Leon, as the latter approached his covert on horseback, coming from the vale.

As to their terrible sufferings since being shot, their battling with the wolves, and all that had followed, they said nothing; but both the outlaws gazed with hatred and contempt upon the craven wretch before them.

Major Linwood trembled from head to foot as they spoke, both of them asserting that hanging was too easy and honorable a death for such as he, who had shot in such a dastardly manner, the very man who had saved him from death.

And not only this, but had stolen from him the maiden, for whom he had battled with and beaten the band of Mountain Mose.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE QUALITY OF MERCY.

As the outlaws ceased speaking a murmur of pent-up astonishment, abhorrence and hatred, burst out; all shooting glances of disgust and vengeful meaning at the major who suddenly sunk to the ground, as those who had been supporting him, withdrew their hands, and stepped aside, as from a loathsome reptile.

"Leon Lisle, my friend, do you feel equal to answering a few questions?" asked Captain Gordon, sinking to his knees, at the side of the young man, and taking his hand.

The doctor had just been laying a cloth, saturated with cool water, upon Leon's head.

The latter opened his eyes, and cast a glance into the face of his questioner, that would have melted a heart of stone; as he whispered, in a strange manner:

"Where is Arline—little Arline Andrews? Have the miscreants killed her? Or is she in the power of the dastard Lawrence Linwood?"

"Arline Andrews is safe, my boy, and at her home; but she is very ill. However, she is not in danger. She will recover, as, I trust you will also.

"But you must try and keep your mind at rest in respect to her. We are aware, that she owes her life to you, several times over; and, if it is not asking too much, we would like to have you satisfy us in regard to a few points that have puzzled those who have determined to see justice done, though the heavens should fall.

"Did you kill the outlaw sentinel, at the stronghold of Mountain Mose, thus risking your life in order that you might save Major Linwood and his son Lawrence.

"I did. But to be just to myself, for I am human, I did not know who they were. I saw that two captives were bound—in fact I saw them flogged, from where I was, high up on the gulch wall, and I resolved that I would make an attempt to save them.

A dense circle of listening planters now surrounded Leon, bending to hear the words he so faintly uttered. Their faces were filled with wonder, admiration, and sympathy.

"Proceed, Lisle, if it does not fatigue you," said Captain Gordon.

"I assisted them down the gulch, for they could not more than crawl at first. I then directed them to await my return, when they reached the moonlit section of the defile ahead. Then I started back to procure horses for them. The bandits had, by this time, discovered their dead comrade, and the release of the captives, and rushed suddenly upon me; but I battled for life, and for the lives of those I had saved.

"You know the result. Just then, I heard horsemen coming up the gulch. I secreted myself, reloaded my weapons, and peeped out. To my great dismay, I saw Arline Andrews, a captive to the outlaws!

"It made me furious. I brained the leaders, fired at all—in fact, I hardly know what I did. However, I rescued Arline, and found myself, somehow, in the saddle, with her in my arms.

"Then, from the pines, sprung the two men whom I had released, with the weapons that I had given them, bearing upon me. To my great amazement, I then recognized them as Major Linwood, and his son Lawrence!

"The latter had attempted to take my life, in the big gulch, when I killed the bears.

"Then all became a blank; and the next I knew, I was lying upon the rocky floor of the gulch, and an outlaw astride of me, with uplifted knife. I felt that my time had, at last, arrived, when a man suddenly dashed out from the rock, and hurled himself upon my would-be murderer. Both then engaged in a most desperate fight. My rescuer, judging from his words to his antagonist, had known me when he was an honest man; hence his fight to save my life. But he lost his own, for both rolled, while contending for the mastery, into an abyss.

"I soon staggered up the vale, somewhere above this point, where I secured a horse that had been stolen from me some time ago, and rode down the gulch, with the intention of pursuing the Linwoods, and rescuing Arline; but I was shot by that wounded outlaw yonder, from his hiding place. At least, that is the confession, I have just heard him make.

"Since then, I have suffered the tortures of the lost, both in mind and body, being forced to fight for life with the wolves, and to suffer from thirst beyond the power of words to express.

"Thanks, many thanks to you all, gentlemen, for your kindness."

"No thanks required, Leon, my boy," said Gordon. "It is we who should ask your pardon, for we came here with the intention of hanging you if you still lived.

"Major Linwood swore that he and his son were captured by your orders—that you belonged to the band of Mountain Mose, and that he and Lawrence escaped by their own efforts. He stated that they killed, or wounded all the outlaws and yourself, to rescue Miss Andrews, whom you had abducted, and were carrying, in a senseless condition, to the retreat of the bandits."

"Can it be possible!" exclaimed Leon Lisle. "Gentlemen, as a favor to me, I ask you to allow that wretched old villain to go scot free. I claim the privilege of being allowed to avenge my own wrongs. Let him go!

"But, where is that infamous dastard, Lawrence Linwood? I shall be forced to rid the earth of his presence, when I am strong again."

Thus spoke Leon.

"He is in the camp, alone," replied one of the planters. "He said he was too ill to accompany his father and us here."

"I'll bet my horse against a cotton-tailed rabbit, that Lawrence Linwood did not remain in camp ten minutes after we were out of sight," said another, quickly.

"I have no doubt your suspicions are correct," returned Captain Gordon; "but we'll have him, if he's within a thousand miles!"

"Remember, captain," put in Leon, "that, if I live, he belongs to me."

"Yes, Lisle; but it will be a long time before you will be able to take the saddle again."

"But, now, tell us," asked Captain Gordon, "who it was that drew Arline through the cedars, as we rode up to the dead bears, when her father was just below her, where she sat?"

"It was Lawrence Linwood!"

Ejaculations of astonishment and anger broke from the lips of the planters.

"Where were you, Leon?"

"High up, on the upper edge of the gulch wall, looking down."

"Why did you not remain with Arline after you had so nobly rescued her from death?"

"I did not care to meet her father, who holds a very bitter enmity against mine. They fought a duel many years ago."

"That's all square. Now, what were the circumstances connected with your being in the cavern at the gulch?"

"When I saw Lawrence Linwood run down the ledge with Arline in his arms, I was furious and started to overtake him and release her.

"He probably heard me dashing down the mountain-side, sprung into the cavern, and laid Arline down. Then he clutched a heavy club, and as I rushed past the mouth of the cave he knocked me senseless.

"He then, I suppose, dragged me into the cave, thinking that he had killed me.

"As I recovered consciousness I witnessed his delivery of the young lady to her father, and heard him assert that I had been her abductor.

"Enraged beyond measure, but helpless to act against the dastard, I returned up the gorge, remaining near the dead bears until morning.

"When I had removed and secreted the skins of the animals, and buried the negro, I took my saddle and blanket over my shoulder and set out to return to my home. But on my way I discovered the retreat of the outlaws, much to my amazement and pleasure, and there I saw the captives, whom I afterward rescued, to my bitter regret and sorrow."

"All right, my boy," said Gordon. "Everything that was strange, and, through the statements of the Linwoods, against you, is now clear. We will do all in our power for your comfort here, and will convey you to your home in the morning."

The congratulations and expressions of sympathy and friendship that came from all around seemed to give Leon much gratification.

He soon, however, closed his eyes, being much fatigued from so much speaking.

The doctor had given him a rather powerful opiate. He had done the same, for the two wounded bandits, and both of them were now in a deathlike slumber.

Of this Captain Gordon satisfied himself when he left Leon's side and went to inspect them.

Major Linwood lay like one dead where he had sunk, as has been stated, after the men who had been supporting him had withdrawn in loathing and detestation from him.

"Gentlemen," said the captain, "we will encamp up in the vale that we have heard spoken of for the night.

"Be good enough to lead your horses there at once and remove the equipments also.

"Mr. Brown, will you and Anderson guard the gulch, taking post at the bend, until relieved?"

"We will remove the wounded to the little valley, if the doctor does not forbid it. As to the major, we will decide as to what ought to be done with the cowardly old villain in the morning. I'll take care of him for the night."

In fifteen minutes more the planters were encamped in the rock-enclosed vale; their fires were blazing brightly, and the evening meal was being hastily prepared.

Leon was resting quietly, and the two outlaws, who also were still sleeping, were moved on blankets to the south side of the little valley. All was peace in the camp.

CHAPTER XXII.

STANDING NOT ON THE ORDER OF THEIR GOING.

AGAIN the darkness of night enveloped the retreat of Mountain Mose; but the wounded men were safe from the attacks of the wolves.

The horses of the planters were picketed in the grassy vale, as were also the animals of the bandits, from which the equipments had been removed.

The chief of the mountain outlaws might be one of the slain and mangled corpses, or he might have escaped. On the other hand, he might not have been in either of the bands that had been overwhelmed by death and wounds.

How it was, none could tell, and neither Bud nor Bill could give any information on the subject. Probably they did not care to do so.

The cavern was found to be of considerable size, and there were various chambers that were connected by rough, natural passages. Much plunder and provisions were found therein, but no sign of any gold or silver.

Bright fires were kindled, and a bountiful meal was prepared by those of the planters who had been used to camping out.

The saddle and bridle belonging to Leon Lisle that had been left high up on the shelf of the huge defile, had also been recovered, under his directions.

After supper and pipes had been enjoyed, the weary planters rolled themselves in their blankets; Captain Gordon detailing a single guard over the animals, one at the entrance to the vale, and another at the bend, to prevent their being surprised.

The two wounded bandits were made as comfortable as possible, but the doctor asserted that they had but slight chance for life.

Leon fell into a gentle slumber, his pulse being considered, under the circumstances, quite favorable.

Major Linwood was paralyzed by the terrible position in which he found himself, and the consciousness that he was liable to be lynched by his neighbors.

He therefore decided, that, did he not effect his escape during the night, his prospects in the morning would be gloomy ones.

The stern and revengeful faces of the planters revealed their hatred and contempt. So he determined to assume a more helpless condition, and thus favor his escape. This, his keepers would consider it impossible for one in his condition to do; but he had heard Leon Lisle say where he had left his saddle and bridle, and he knew the manner of entering the vale from the gulch.

The major felt sure that he could accomplish his freedom, were he once upon the ledge.

The last relief of the guard was at two o'clock, and then Captain Gordon found all was well in the camp; but, when the gray streaks of dawn shot up in the east, a shout of alarm aroused the whole encampment.

All rushed to the point of commotion, Captain Gordon instantly appearing from the cave.

Not only had Major Linwood disappeared, but the two outlaws lay, stark and stiff, their glassy eyes fixed upon the sky. They had gone together, to solve the great mystery—gone to answer for their many crimes!

Further details, in regard to the party of planters, are unnecessary.

Men were dispatched in all directions, in search of the Linwoods, and a wagon was procured from the nearest plantation, in which Leon Lisle was transported to his home; his father being almost distracted when he saw his condition, but filled with pride in his son, when the adventures, through which he had gone, were recounted.

The stolen horses, that had been found in the retreat of the bandits, were delivered to their owners, when the planters returned to their homes on the James river, all greatly surprised to learn that their comrades, sent to search for Lawrence Linwood, had failed to find any trace of the miscreant.

Leon Lisle dispatched two of his slaves for the bearskins, which were put in good shape, by an old mountain friend, who regretted not having been with him, during his thrilling experiences with savage beasts and still more savage men.

The doctor imposed the utmost quiet upon his patient, and freedom from all excitement; asserting that it would be weeks before he would recover sufficiently to ride again. He thoroughly understood the case, however, and felt that it was his duty to keep Leon informed of the condition of Arline Andrews, which he learned regularly from the physician who was in attendance.

The latter reported great progress toward recovery.

Arline had remained, for some time, in a most unnatural state, her mind having been affected by her fearful experiences at the Blue Ridge; but, more than all, because impressed with the idea that her preserver had met with a horrible death.

As may be inferred, Major Linwood escaped by the same shelf that had been traversed by Leon Lisle, in his descent into the outlaw retreat; and he lost no time in making his way, by night, to his home.

Once under his own roof, and with arms to defend himself, and slaves to obey him, he became less afraid of his life being taken; and, after having had food, and rest, and stimulants, his mind became more evenly balanced, and he decided that he was in no danger personally, but that it would be sure death for Lawrence, should the latter be caught.

A letter was brought to the major, which had been left by his son; but the contents were merely a copy of the result of the conference between Lawrence and his father, in regard to the future proceedings and plans of the young villain.

The postscript, only, was of much importance. It was as follows:—

"Don't allow the old colonel to find out about the affairs at the gulch, if possible to prevent it; and force him off at once to Texas, or all is lost. Bribe the doctor to advise change of air, etc."

Major Linwood acted immediately upon this suggestion, but he found, to his rage, that he could not bribe the physician. He was, there-

fore, obliged to put the screws down hard to effect his purpose.

This he did, by threatening an immediate foreclosure of the mortgage which he held upon the estate and slaves of the colonel, if the latter did not at once set out for the Lone Star State.

Such had been the mental torture of Colonel Andrews, since the scene at the Blue Ridge, that he was far from being himself. The terrible blow, that he had received on his head, had weakened his mind, causing him the most intense terror and apprehension, at the slightest cause.

Not having signed the deeds of sale, or received any of the purchase money, the colonel knew that Linwood could put a stop to the sale; and, by enforcing his own claims, could ruin him financially.

Thus it was, that Major Linwood succeeded in his plans.

A secret compact between the planters, for the capture and lynching of Lawrence Linwood, had not been the means of the villain's being traced; although the search was kept up for some time.

It served to favor the plans of the major, for it kept many of the best friends of Colonel Andrews from visiting him. Linwood, himself, was seen by no one; and, as he kept aloof, his neighbors, having no charge against him, except for having favored and assisted his villainous son, did not molest him.

Thus, by the fox-like cunning of the old major, the business connected with the sale of the plantation of Colonel Andrews, and also his personal property, was transacted in his presence, secrecy being agreed upon, between him, the seller, and the purchaser.

He received signed and witnessed documents, which placed the colonel more than ever in his power, should the latter fail to depart at once, and locate in a section of Texas, which should be selected by the major.

This, too, was to be kept secret from all the Virginia friends of Colonel Andrews, until such a time as permission was graciously given him, by his master, to reveal his whereabouts.

Such was the power which this old villain held over him.

In consequence of these arrangements, it happened that the departure of the colonel's wagon-train, his daughter being conveyed in an easy ambulance, occurred in the early part of a dark night. And the train was far away to the southward, before it became known that Colonel Andrews had really gone.

Meanwhile Leon Lisle was slowly recovering, but when he received the intelligence of the departure of the one upon whom all his hopes were fixed—the knowledge that she and her father had left in the night, and in a secret manner, and this through one of his slaves—the young man was prostrated by a relapse and fever, which endangered his life.

This delayed, for a long time, his recovery.

When Leon was again able to think on all that had occurred, he was not slow in grasping the entire situation.

He felt convinced at once that the Linwoods were concerned in this abrupt departure.

He knew that his darling was in danger, and that she would be lost to him forever, did he not seek her, until he knew that she was safe.

He must follow the wagon trail to the Lone Star State. He resolved that he would do this, satisfied that he would be enabled to fulfill his oath of vengeance upon Lawrence Linwood, at the same time that he was watching and guarding the beautiful Arline Andrews.

Did he not do this, the fair girl would, he felt, be sacrificed to the pride of her weak and foolish father; for Leon had, by this time, been informed of the true state of the business connections between the old colonel and Major Linwood.

Whatever happened would, he was satisfied, be in the way of business; and in a way out of which Colonel Andrews would not be able to extricate himself.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"WESTWARD THE COURSE OF EMPIRE TAKES ITS WAY."

THE Colorado river of Texas has its source some twenty-five miles west of the eastern border of the Llano Estacado, or Staked Plain.

This source is a salt spring, and from it, to where the river pours its tribute into the Mexique Gulf, it is, as the bee flies, four hundred and fifty miles; but to follow its serpentine windings, it is nearly twice that distance.

For the first hundred miles the water is of a bluish tinge, like that of the ocean, and fully as salt.

As may be inferred, it is, for a long distance from the Llano Estacado, of no use to the thirst-maddened wanderer of the plains. But, even where the water of the river is very brackish, springs are to be found on either side of it, and these, although strongly impregnated with sulphur and other minerals, are free from salt.

The Rio Colorado for the first hundred miles flows through a barren and worthless waste, the water becoming less and less salt, then brackish,

until gradually—being purified and filtered through quicksands, and also increased in volume by small streams running into it—it serves to irrigate some of the best grazing plains of the Lone Star State.

From Belknap to Austin, the country, through which the Rio Colorado flows, may with truth be called as favorable a section for rearing, with profit and success, cattle, horses and mules, as there is on the American continent.

From Austin to the Gulf of Mexico, the lands on either side of this noble stream may be said to be equally as desirable for the production of cotton, corn and other cereals. The better cotton lands are, however, some distance below Austin, and nearer the Gulf of Mexico.

A quarter of a century ago, and indeed for some years previous, the Lower Colorado country was a favorite one for planters, who had deserted, or disposed of their "worn out lands, in the older Southern States," and established themselves on extensive plantations, purchasing large tracts of land, on either side of the river, at a low figure.

This fact caused their residences, generally speaking, to be some distance apart.

Some fifty miles from the mouth of the Colorado, on the south side of this stream, was a deep bayou, which extended for quite half a mile in a southerly direction, inland, from the river, and nearly to the border of the timber-belt, or bottom-timber.

Although deep, and its waters inky black, Alligator Bayou was narrow—so narrow, in fact, that the branches of the huge moss-draped trees on its banks nearly met; thus causing, as the sun was near meridian, an irregular line of sunlight, shining down on the otherwise black waters.

Beyond the line of timber on the banks, were inclosed fields; and beyond these, the wide prairies.

At the point where the bayou put in from the river, the latter swept northerly, in a horse-shoe bend; betraying the cause of the formation of the almost stagnant inlet, washed out by spring freshets, that swept from the north, in resistless force, and too heavy in volume to make the short turn in the natural channel.

Within this bend, at the swell of the same, and fifty yards from the timber line, was a roomy mansion, of the prevailing Southern style of architecture; with wide verandas in its front, and at each end. The kitchen cabin, and the huge bake-oven of stone were near at hand; and, beyond them, a row of neat white-washed negro cabins.

Climbing roses, and other flowering vines entwined the veranda posts, covering the roof of the piazza, and even up between the windows of the second story; almost screening the roof of the mansion from view.

Opposite this typical southern home, was a wide shell drive, of crescent form, that swept from the edge of the timber, near the head of the bayou, to the front of the dwelling, and thence around to the westerly point of the bottom timber; when each road led out between fields to the open plain. Then it emerged into a traveled trail, used by wagon-trains from Matagorda, up the Colorado, on the south side of the river.

This long, sweeping, shelled drive-way bordered a large tract of rich bottom-land, of oblong form; the smaller end being where the drives formed a junction, or became one, between two fenced cotton-fields.

This portion of ground was an immense garden and orchard combined; a labyrinth of shell walks and paths, winding in every direction, amid flower-beds that were bordered with box.

Groves of oranges, lemons, pomegranates, and figs, with pear, apple, and plum orchards, greeted the eye from different points.

The drive was, except exactly in front of the mansion, lined on its inner side by a row of beautiful magnolias, the perfume from which was heavy, almost sickening, in its depth and richness, to one of sensitive organization.

On the opposite side of the sweeping drive towered the timber of the Rio Colorado, dense and dark, seeming to guard and screen the clear rushing river, that nurtured the roots.

All in all, it was a most lovely scene; one that would gratify and rejoice the senses, and arouse all the artistic taste and admiration in a beholder, as well as create a longing to rush through the luxuriant riches of Nature, and pluck and taste the enticingly colored fruits.

And, animate forms, human and brute, were not lacking to enliven the beautiful scene, gorgeous beneath the blazing sun, so near the tropics; for in the fields were negroes, harvesting golden grain, while the women were picking the snow-white cotton-bolls from the tall plants that stretched afar, in long, straight, and regular rows.

Beyond these fields, upon the prairie, that was bespangled with flowers of every hue, were sleek, fat cattle, horses and mules, with flocks of playful sheep.

Beautiful it was, indeed, beyond the dream of a poet.

Mexican hammocks, woven in gay colors, were hung beneath the veranda, while easy and

roomy chairs and settees, of different patterns, were placed here and there.

All within view, from front and rear of this dwelling, indicated wealth, comfort, plenty, and happiness, a glance through the wide open windows and doors revealing rich carpets from foreign looms, valuable paintings, heavy carved furniture, rare *bric-a-brac*, and a grand piano, all in artistic taste in appearance and arrangement.

Thus have I endeavored to describe Paradise Plantation as it was one year after it had been purchased by Colonel Anthony Andrews upon his arrival in the Lone Star State from Virginia.

The colonel had been most fortunate in securing this place, as it was owned by an English gentleman of taste and wealth, who was obliged to dispose of the estate, being called to England by the death of his father to take possession of his ancestral home and title.

Much rejoiced had the colonel been at thus securing such a valuable and beautiful home for himself and his lovely daughter, he having, since the death of his wife in Virginia, some years previous, only this child to care for.

In this inspection of Paradise Plantation and its surroundings, we have not penetrated the grand old bottom-timber, within the cool, dark shades of which, in a favorite nook, we shall, in our next chapter, meet again our little friend, Arline Andrews.

The latter was now the acknowledged beauty and belle of the lower Colorado, although she but rarely attended the frequent festivals that were held on the different plantations.

Never, for a moment, after her recovery on the journey to Texas, could the young girl bring herself to believe that Leon Lisle was dead, although she could not explain why she thought so.

Her father had told her again and again that such was the case, he actually believing the latter statement of Major Linwood to the effect that Leon had died after having been conveyed to his home.

The major had, soon after the departure of Colonel Andrews and his daughter, set out for Richmond, where he met his son, and the pair took steamer for New Orleans.

From the Crescent City they proceeded to Galveston, at which place they ascertained that Paradise Plantation on the Rio Colorado, was for sale. Colonel Andrews was, at this time, at Houston, and Linwood wrote him, directing the immediate purchase of the place.

He did not, however, seek an interview with the colonel until some three months afterward.

He also prevented Lawrence from forcing his company upon Arline, until such time as he saw fit. The latter found the allurements of New Orleans more than he could withstand, and he plunged into a round of dissipation, becoming deeply involved from losses at cards.

The major disposed of his property on the James, when he joined his son, and was very indignant when he found what had been the course of the latter. It was not long, however, before he himself took to drink and gaming.

Eventually both went to Galveston, the major writing to Andrews to meet him in the Island City. Here he and his hopeful son formed a plan to further involve the colonel, by winning his portion of the plantation. But, in this, they were disappointed; for the colonel got up from the first sitting, the winner of one-half the amount of the mortgage held by the major.

This infuriated the Linwoods, who began to see that their power over Andrews had been greatly curtailed; and both set their wits at work to bring about a marriage between Arline and Lawrence.

But they found the colonel inclined to repudiate all past agreements; he being more willing to give them satisfaction at cards than in any other way.

Thus matters stood at the end of the year, when Lawrence Linwood became desperate, resolving to take the cards in his own hands, and play the game himself, regardless of the wishes of his father.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DEAD ALIVE.

A LIGHT breeze from the Mexique Gulf caused the leaves, high up on the branches of the towering timber that bordered Alligator Bayou, to flutter; and the foliage, along the outer line of trees, as well. Beyond it however, on the prairie, there was scarce a zephyr.

The blazing afternoon sun, that rolled westward, through its brazen domains, was powerless to shoot even a slender arrow of its glorious light through the dense and tangled network.

In the preceding chapter, an attempt was made to describe a Paradise, which lacked only a Peri, to make the illusion perfect.

No time shall be lost in introducing her. On this sultry afternoon, the fair heiress of Paradise Plantation has sought the cool shades of the timber, for her accustomed *siesta*.

Just on the western bank of the bayou, and within a few yards of the head of the same, in a space some thirty feet long, and half that dis-

tance in width, perfectly clear of undergrowth, carpeted with dead leaves and springy to the tread, we find her.

A path leads from the circling drive that sweeps around to the front of the mansion, to this cool, natural grotto on the bank of the bayou; but one is obliged to part, with each hand, the foliage and branches of the undergrowth, that border and inclose the grotto, to reach it.

Two strong posts are set into the earth, in the middle of it, some twelve feet apart; to the tops of which are attached the ropes that support a Mexican hammock, of many brilliant colors. In the dark shades, can be seen little more than the outlines of the picture. So, at least it seems.

But she is there—she, whom we have seen in such ruder scenes, and whom we have followed with so much interest.

Reclining in the hammock, we behold Arline Andrews, lovelier than ever.

No angelic shape could be fairer, or more lovable!

Arline Andrews was but sweet sixteen on the very day that she is thus brought again to our notice.

She had planned a celebration of this, her sixteenth birthday, but had abandoned it on account of the absence of her father, the colonel having gone on a business trip to Matagorda. But Arline had cast to the winds all the unpleasantness occasioned by this disappointment. She had taken a gallop over the prairie just before dinner, and afterward had taken a book, and sought her favorite retreat. This had soon been cast aside.

She had become drowsy, and everything in and around the spot lulled to sweet slumber.

The soft, weird whispers of the zephyr, amid moss, and vine, and foliage; the lazy and continuous humming of the insects, and the song of the birds—all these, as well as the balmy, perfumed air, were conducive to repose in any one.

Thus the scene remained for some time; naught except the beautiful Arline, and the natural beauties around and above her sleeping form to meet the view.

But fate had decreed that the scene must change, and that a form, as repulsive as the maiden was enticing and beautiful, must mar the view, and contaminate it with its terrible presence.

Perhaps one standing on the bank of the bayou, near Arline, would have failed to notice any change in the surface of the water, or, even if so, would have been free from any apprehension, from an excusable mistake in regard to the character of the object that broke the surface.

The surface was broken, however, but so slowly that it caused but a few circular ripples, as a rough, dark, object, with much the appearance of the end of a log that had been long submerged in the mud, began to raise itself from some unaccountable cause.

Higher above the surface the seeming log projected, revealing a stranger shape, and, stranger still, seeming to be gifted with life, for it glided slowly toward the bank.

Faster and faster the hideous thing neared the steep bank, that afforded an unobstructed view of the sleeping maiden. There was no room for doubt now. There was no cause to mistake the huge saurian for anything else in nature.

As the head of the amphibious monster projected over the edge of the bank, and its tail extended to the bayou, it must have measured fully ten feet in length. The jaws of the huge lizard were open, revealing its terrible teeth. All nature seemed suddenly to be stricken mute in horror.

Silent as death itself, and the moment is pregnant with death—death in a most horrible form, a lovely and innocent girl the seemingly doomed victim!

Yet, through all this, she sleeps on; Arline sleeps, and her guardian angel, it would appear, sleeps as well.

Yet for all this, a mysterious agency of some character was, doubtless, at work.

Perhaps the extreme danger, the nearness to a terrible death from a most dread source, exerted an influence which we cannot explain, upon the nerves and senses of the sleeping maiden.

For, slowly, her long black lashes arose from her cheeks, revealing her blue eyes, that at first were filled with a bewildered expression; but she was so situated that she could look down, and around her, seeing the bank and the bayou without moving.

Her gaze at once rested on the huge reptile, that with wide open jaws, and gleaming, horrible teeth, was slowly crawling toward her. It was now, not more than five feet distant, and its horrid eyes were fixed upon her!

Arline's gaze was, at once, frozen in dread terror upon the fearful monster. Her lovely face became ghastly and distorted.

She strove to scream, but her tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of her mouth, and her very heart ceased its beating, for the moment.

"Oh, God! Oh, Father in Heaven, save me!"

This was the mental prayer of the poor

maiden; a prayer, which her lips, from which the blood had receded, refused to utter.

It was providential that Arline Andrews was thus powerless to speak or move; for, had she done either, had she not remained motionless as one dead, the alligator would at once have sprung forward, and clutching her between its ponderous jaws, would have dragged her forever from view, beneath the inky waters, and there devoured her.

It was a spectacle, that, thank God! was witnessed in the nick of time; looked upon, to daunt the observer for a moment with horror most fearful, and that rendered action impossible. But this was cast off, by a herculean effort, and action instantaneously followed.

A rush, a swish of branch and bush, that caused the alligator to glide rapidly forward; and, at the very instant that its huge jaws were about to close on the dangling limb of the young girl, the hammock was grasped, and pulled backward from out the yawning mouth, just as the same, with a far sounding and vicious snap and crunch, came together!

The next instant, a piercing shriek shot from the lips of poor Arline, as she felt her limb thrust up, and into the hammock; the latter swinging, back and forth, rapidly.

The spell that had bound her was broken, but she instantly relapsed.

Sitting upright, and clutching each side of the hammock, she became again devoid of all power of motion or speech, at the terrible sight that met her view.

She knew that some one had bounded from the undergrowth, when she was on the threshold of death—a horrible death—and had saved her life; but she had no idea who her rescuer was.

A swift glance, however, upon the almost instantaneous recovery of her physical powers, had revealed a sight that froze the blood in her veins, and caused her nearly to lose consciousness.

This sight was naught else than that of a handsome, Apollo like young man, her preserver, upon the back of the immense saurian; his legs coiled around its body, one hand clutching a paw of the loathsome lizard, while the other shot up and down, plunging a long knife through the tender skin that was under the beast's forearm.

Whirling over and over, huge jaws crashing together, and long tail thrashing furiously, the terrible monster of the bayou rolled down the bank, and disappeared beneath the surface of the water, which became white with foam; the waters splashing and sputtering high up in air, quickly falling, and then a whirlpool was formed, in which spun the alligator, with him who had arrived so opportunely upon the scene, clinging vengeance to the repulsive-looking monster, and plunging his knife up and down into the vulnerable parts of its body.

At length they disappeared together in mad, furious and most ill-matched conflict, which it seemed must end in the death of both man and monster. And the end must be soon.

As the youthful stranger and the gigantic lizard were vanishing from view, the pale, handsome but determined face of her preserver was for an instant plainly seen by Arline Andrews, causing her features to flush, first with an expression of superstitious dread and wonder, and then to one of a joy that was more than earthly.

This speedily changed to a look of anguish and terror, born of most torturing concern.

"Leon Lisle!" she screamed. "Oh, Father in Heaven, preserve him who has again risked his life to save me! Oh, help him—Leon!"

These cries came in tones that spoke the agony of the maiden. They were uttered in pleading prayer, which expressed the most torturing anguish, deathlike in its intensity.

Then with a shriek that sounded through the timber, echoing amid the natural arches, poor Arline sunk back in her hammock as ghastly, motionless and senseless as a corpse!

CHAPTER XXV.

DRAWING NEARER.

Two days previous to the birthday of Arline Andrews, Major Linwood and his son Lawrence had arrived in Matagorda; and as the two sat by the open window of their apartment, they suddenly and simultaneously uttered a cry of satisfaction.

The old man had held the purse-strings, and his son had not always been able to assume independent airs and acts; but he had made up his mind that he would get his father to drinking, and into a game of cards with some one who would keep him on a protracted spree.

Then he would gallop up the river to Paradise Plantation, and demand an interview with Arline.

He would plead his cause as a fond lover should, and if refused, would inform her that she would lose her home, and that she and her father would be beggars, if she did not wed him.

Arline, he was confident, would sacrifice herself rather than see her father made miserable in his old age; for Lawrence knew that Colonel

Andrews had told his daughter nothing of his financial embarrassments.

Major Linwood had reported to his son that Leon Lisle was dead, for he knew that Lawrence would otherwise be in constant dread that the young man he had so grievously wronged would, one day, drop down on him and take his revenge.

Colonel Andrews had also been greatly relieved upon being informed of Leon's death, and of course had no fears that she would dream any longer, as it was evident she once had done, of wedding with the son of the man whom he so much hated.

Both the Linwoods had recently been greatly puzzled as to the nature of their next proceedings toward the accomplishment of their purpose.

A wandering life ill suited the old major, and he longed to live beneath the same roof with Colonel Andrews and Arline, either as part, or as entire owner of the plantation, and his son the husband of the colonel's fair daughter.

This was the one grand object of both father and son, and it never left the mind of the former, even for an hour.

But, as has been mentioned, Lawrence had resolved to try his hand alone, if he could gain the necessary documents to prove the assertions he intended making to Arline.

The only impediment in his path was the old colonel; so Lawrence determined that he would visit Paradise Plantation when the owner was absent. His cry of surprise, therefore, when he sprung from his chair at the window was occasioned by his having seen Colonel Andrews ride past.

He knew now that the coast was clear—that Arline was alone—and he resolved if all else failed, and he could secure a reasonable sum of money from his father, that he would abduct the maiden and fly with her toward the Rio Grande. There, in some unfrequented section, he would establish a ranch and live in peace and security.

The satisfaction expressed by the elder Linwood, at discovering Colonel Andrews, arose from a far different cause. He thought at once that he would now have an opportunity to win back at cards not only what he had lost on the last occasion, but also the colonel's portion of Paradise Plantation.

Could this only be accomplished, then Arline would be forced to marry Lawrence, or be a beggar.

Major Linwood was nearly beside himself with joy whenever he pictured this state of affairs in his mind. He not only believed such success possible, but in the highest degree probable.

"Lawrence," he exclaimed, throwing away the cigar which he had but just ignited; "this is indeed luck! There is old Andrews, and he is the very chicken I intend to pick before sunset."

"If I can induce him to play again, he'll find to his cost that Fortune is a fickle jade, for I'll win back what I lost and what he has left along with it. Fate led us here. Everything points to success. But, remember, I run this game by myself."

"I don't want your assistance in any particular; for, Lawrence, you always confuse me."

"Your absence is now necessary, for if the colonel sees you, he'll be suspicious, and steer clear of us. Go hunting, or fishing, or anything you like, to pass the day; only keep out of my way, and the old colonel's sight."

Lawrence was far from being offended at this.

Everything was favorable for his own plan. He resolved to start at once, but leading his father to suppose that he had gone on a hunt. But for all that, he pretended to be vexed.

There was one thing lacking. He needed money.

He said, somewhat crustily:

"Fork over a thousand, dad, and I'll ride down to Indianola. I may strike a flat, with well-lined pockets there. That will leave an open field for you; but you had better not prance around and kick too high, or the old fellow may lay you out."

Major Linwood counted out the money.

"You value my privilege rather high, young man; but never mind—I am confident of winning a big pile from the colonel. I feel it in my bones. But don't get to drinking deep, or you may get into some difficulty at Indianola."

Lawrence helped himself to a glass of whisky with a grin, and then, unlocking a hand trunk in a corner of the room, muttered:

"I've got a game of my own to play, old man; and I'll win if you lose."

Taking out a package of papers, unperceived by his father, he thrust them into his breast pocket, made some changes in his costume, and left the room. Passing down the rear stairway to the stable-yard, he bargained for a saddle-horse for a few days' ride down the coast.

Setting out in the direction of Indianola, no sooner did he get beyond view from Matagorda, than he circled around to the northwest, and sped inland, up the Colorado, toward Paradise Plantation.

The sun had passed meridian, on the day following, when Lawrence Linwood came within view of Alligator Bayou, and he looked around, with not a little delight, at the beauties that were spread before him.

Every means had been used by his father to keep him from seeking the home of Colonel Andrews. Its location, even, had for some time been kept a secret from him. But, now that he saw it, his emotion was great.

He had no reason to doubt that Arline would look upon him as her brave and gallant rescuer.

We may imagine, therefore, something of his state of mind when he rode up the drive toward the mansion; he having, by a strange coincidence, arrived at nearly the same moment, as his rival, Leon Lisle.

The latter, after searching through Eastern Texas in vain, had at last found the home of his darling; and, as we have seen, providentially reached her favorite retreat at the very instant that she was so near being seized by the hideous alligator, and dragged into the inky waters of the bayou.

Up to the front of the mansion rode Lawrence Linwood, and springing from his horse, he secured the animal to a post. He then looked in anger around him, cursing the lazy negroes for not rushing out to wait upon him.

Not a soul was within view. All was silent around Paradise Plantation.

"Not a very hospitable reception; or, to speak more correctly, no reception at all," muttered the young man, as he stood still for a moment.

The words had no sooner left his lips, than a shriek, long and piercing reached his ears, from the direction of the bayou. The sound was somewhat lessened by distance, and from being given beyond the dense undergrowth of timber.

Well did Lawrence know from whom it came.

He had heard the same before in that far-away mountain gorge in the Blue Ridge.

Like a madman, his hat flying from his head, he plunged headlong into the undergrowth. That Arline Andrews was in peril of some kind, he felt assured.

Here was a chance, and a great one, to distinguish himself, and gain a hold upon her heart.

After tearing through the thickets, in his frantic haste noticing not the path, he finally came upon the fairy-like nook near the bank.

In all her strange and startling beauty, Arline lay in her hammock before him.

Her golden hair was hanging, in disheveled masses downward, her features were the pallor of death, and were stamped with horror. Yet there was nothing within view to explain the cause of her emotion, her scream, and her now unconscious condition.

One sweeping glance satisfied young Linwood of this.

Then his black, snake-like eyes fastened upon the angelic maiden, in gloating and admiration, as he stood, bowie in hand, his form rigid, and as if transformed to stone, at the sight before him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AGAIN IN HIS POWER.

WITH a loud cry of terror, Lawrence Linwood staggered, and fell, shooting down the steep bank, and into the deep, dark waters of the bayou.

No wonder was it that the dastard was thus affrighted, for, not ten feet away from him, he had seen framed in the green foliage, the face of one whom he had believed dead—the ghastly living face of Leon Lisle.

No sooner did Lawrence disappear beneath the inky waters than Arline recovered, the plunge probably arousing her, and sat up in the hammock.

At first she was unable to recall the near past.

This bewilderment, however, was but momentary.

Like a flash of light, the last scene that she had looked upon was reproduced in her mind. She knew Leon Lisle still lived, and that he had again saved her from a horrid death.

But, for himself—he might now be lying, torn and mangled, in the dark depths of the bayou. The thought was too terrible.

She began now to see that a great deception had been practiced upon her, a deception to which her father had been a party.

She looked again with some strange fascination at the waters. They were no longer smooth and glassy. The bayou was agitated and muddy, indicating that a struggle was going on.

Cold chills of horror ran through the veins of the maiden. Something seemed to be rising to the surface. She gazed, motionless. A human head darted above the water, and then the arms that wildly thrashed it on every side.

It must be Leon. It could be no other!

Then he was safe, he would be free; and a cry of joy and relief burst from her lips.

Barely had it died away, however, when the

head whirled about. No more terrible sight could have been presented to the gaze of Arline Andrews.

It was the loathsome face of one whom she feared and detested; the one who had attempted to murder Leon Lisle in Virginia, and whom she had not seen nor heard of for a year.

It was more than she could bear; and Arline sunk back again in her hammock, covering her face with her hands, and gasping for breath.

But soon she felt that she dared not remain there. She started up, and darting into the undergrowth, fled along the path toward her home, not daring to look back.

Not until she reached the veranda, did the maiden abate her speed; but, up the steps she flew, and cast herself, panting into her father's roomy chair, trembling and shuddering with a nameless horror.

The fierce fight of Leon Lisle with the huge alligator, prevented him from glancing upward at Arline, whose shriek pierced his ears, as he was drawn beneath the waters. After a parting stab at the saurian, he braced his feet against the monster, and lunged away; swimming under water for some distance up the bayou.

At length emerging, Leon crawled up the bank, and sat among the bushes, panting with exertion. He was now just on the border of the little "open," in which was Arline in her hammock; but he dared not reveal himself, for fear of startling the fair girl.

From the silence, he believed that she had fainted; but, as he was about to satisfy himself in this respect, he heard footsteps approaching.

Stepping carefully to the curtain of leaves, he glanced out. His utter astonishment and jealous fury can be imagined, when he saw, standing near the hammock, in which Arline lay, apparently senseless, none other than his hated foe and rival, Lawrence Linwood!

Leon saw that the coward was suddenly terrified, but he had not supposed that he would have fallen into the bayou; and he stole back from view, the moment that the affrighted wretch disappeared beneath the waters.

Linwood arose, and sunk again; and Leon, more in consideration for Arline than aught else, plunged into the depths, to save the drowning man. At this time, the alligator arose to the surface, dead.

Leon clutched the clothing of his enemy, and swam down the bayou, dragging him out upon the bank, at a point that was screened from view of any one in the "open."

Young Linwood was limp and senseless, but Leon placed him upon his stomach, and rolled him back and forth; pouring some brandy, from a flask which he found in his pocket, between the lips of the unconscious man.

It was not long before respiration became plainly evident, and low moans were heard from him.

As Linwood returned slowly to life, so did Leon's hatred of him resume its sway. He determined, that he would begin, at once, to avenge the many dastardly wrongs that he had suffered through him.

Dropping into the bayou, he swam to the carcass of the alligator, and towed it to the bank, at the point where lay his enemy. Dragging it up, with difficulty, Leon placed the slimy saurian in a natural position, propping the eyes wide open with sticks. This done, he secured Lawrence Linwood to a tree-trunk, opposite the alligator, and in a standing position; his feet but a short distance from the head of the monster, the jaws of which he had distended to the utmost.

Having thus arranged matters, Leon disappeared; just as the groans, that marked the returning consciousness of the miscreant were heard.

He ran on through the timber, for some distance, finally entering a dense thicket, within which was a space clear of bushes. Here, a superb black horse was fastened to a branch, fully equipped for the trail.

Taking entire changes of garments from his saddle bags, Leon soon stood in dry raiment, a splendid specimen of a prairie rover.

His movements were now hasty, for he was anxious in regard to Arline. He was confident that the Linwoods held some power over Colonel Andrews, to the extent of forcing the latter to withhold the facts connected with the occurrences in Virginia; and that the colonel had caused his daughter to believe the report of his death.

As he passed on, with quick stride, through the bottom, and came near the point at which he had secured Lawrence Linwood to the tree, Leon glanced in that direction.

Then his whole manner changed to eager anticipation, as he proceeded toward the house.

When Arline sunk into her father's chair, on the veranda, she was nearly distracted, and overcome with horror. She was unable to decide, so shocked had been her brain, whether she had been in a dream, or the recent startling events had been real.

Had she seen Leon Lisle?

Had he, whom she had been led to believe dead—but who, she felt was living all this time, and true to her—had he arrived in Texas, and been led thus providentially to her side?

Then, too, she had caught sight of another.

Was that real, also?

Just then, Arline became aware, by a movement near her, that a horse was fastened near the steps of the veranda.

Turning, as she arose to her feet, she saw that the animal was fully equipped for the road; and also that it was a strange beast, and different from any on or near the plantation.

Not until then, did anything approaching correct reasoning enter the maiden's mind.

A stranger had arrived, and as there was no stir within, she knew that he had not entered, and made himself known. She felt that it must be Lawrence Linwood!

Had he, then, learned of her father's absence, and come to her home to persecute her with the attentions that had never been other than odious.

Had there been but one man at the bayou?

Who, and what, was he, who she felt was the counterpart of Leon Lisle, but yet who had changed so mysteriously to Lawrence Linwood?

How was she to disentangle the meshes of her perplexing thoughts? Was she going insane?

The poor girl strode back and forth, in a state of mind that cannot be described.

At this very instant she heard a quick step upon the shell drive, and hastily looking in that direction, she saw a young man with graceful bounds clearing the flower-beds, and coming toward her. It was Leon Lisle!

"Arline, my darling! I meet you at last!"

Such was his greeting.

She gave one low cry and threw out her arms in a wistful, longing manner, toward Leon; as the latter sprang upon the veranda and clasped her to his heart.

Too deep were the emotions of the youthful pair for words. Leon's whole soul was mirrored in all its brave and honest love in the glance that read the pure, true heart of Arline.

Thus, for a short time, stood they, screened by the flowering vines, while the young man related in detail all that had happened since he slid down from the rocky ledge to save her from the monster bears of the Blue Ridge.

He explained that, but for the death of his father, soon after his own recovery—the old gentleman having been ill for a long time—he would have traced her before.

As it was, he had searched all Eastern Texas for three months before he ascertained who had been the purchaser of Paradise Plantation.

When Leon explained the recent occurrences at the bayou, and the fact that he had saved Lawrence Linwood from drowning, and secured the dastard to a tree before he had fully recovered; then all the mystery was clear to Arline, and happiness beyond the experience of most mortals ruled the hearts of both.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

LEON LISLE had just ended his long explanations, answering the many questions of his fair companion, who was now alarmed lest Lawrence should escape, and again attempt the life of the man who had but just saved him from death.

Arline could not be said to be composed in mind. It would have been strange, if she had.

To feel that Leon was not only alive, but that he had sought her out, and that he would now be always near her, was more than she could well comprehend. But, as he closed his narration, all was made clear that had been puzzling and strange to her—not to say mysterious.

Little dreamed either of them that other most startling and tragic events were soon to break in upon the second edition of love's young dream, which had been so far above and beyond all their past dreams of possible happiness on earth, as to confuse them, and cause a silence, that was more eloquent than words to fall upon them both.

But these silent communings were broken in upon by the sound of approaching hoofs on the drive—a horse, evidently at an easy trot, coming toward the house.

Arline had stated the fact that her father was absent in Matagorda; and instantly each felt sure that Colonel Andrews was returning home.

This would place Leon in a most awkward and embarrassing position.

"For what reason," asked Arline, "does my father dislike you and yours? Tell me quickly! We must banish it from his mind, whatever it is."

"It is nothing very dreadful," was the reply. "Your father and mine, when quite young, were in love with the same lady. She accepted my father. A duel was the consequence of this. They were both wounded—and there it might have ended, but Colonel Andrews swore enmity against the Lises, to the third and fourth generation."

"But that is such nonsense!" said the girl.

"When papa knows you he must and will respect you."

"I doubt it, Arline; and I had better not meet him at present. You hasten to the front entrance, and I will return by the rear one to my horse."

"Meet me, if possible, at eight o'clock in the garden, where the path enters the wood."

"I will be there, Leon. But promise me you will not release that wretch, Linwood. I fear he will yet do us some great injury."

"Never fear. I shall hand him over to the officers of justice as a dangerous character. I can take care of myself, and of him, too."

Thus they parted, and Arline hurried to the front veranda, while Leon departed by the rear of the mansion to the timber.

He was fated, however, not to reach the end of the side veranda; for sounds met his ear which not only caused him to halt, but to turn suddenly and hasten after Arline.

As he came in sight, he thought of one of the strange scenes that had, a year previous, occurred among the gulches of the Blue Ridge.

As he darted forward, and caught Arline in his arms, Colonel Andrews, who had halted suddenly, sat in his saddle, gazing down the drive toward the fields, his revolver in his hand.

Some two hundred yards from his position, was a horseman, approaching him, at break-neck speed, and yelling like a fiend. One glance showed Leon that it was Major Linwood.

His hat was gone, his long light hair flew wild, and his visage was that of a fury. He was gnashing his teeth, and foam was flying from his mouth, as he cursed in a horrible manner.

His fagged horse was galloping in a labored and wavering manner, proving that it had been pressed long and hard.

Leon Lisle realized, on the instant, that blood was about to be spilled; and, catching Arline in his arms, he rushed through an open window, laying her upon a lounge.

"Remain here!" he exclaimed. "Your father shall not be injured. That demon will shoot wild, and you will be in danger if you are on the veranda. Don't move, I beg of you!"

Dashing out, Leon saw the frantic major, with leveled revolver, thundering directly upon Colonel Andrews, both men shooting rapidly.

In a moment more, both the horses and their riders lay upon the drive; the animals kicking spasmodically in the agonies of death.

Colonel Andrews lay outstretched, apparently dead; while, with the look of an exultant fiend, Major Linwood was crawling upon hands and knees, evidently wounded, toward his prostrate victim.

Before Leon could reach the scene of the desperate personal conflict the major was astride of Colonel Andrews, and had drawn his bowie.

Raising the knife on high, murder in every line of his repulsive face, he gathered all his strength to plunge the blade into the breast of Colonel Andrews; but Leon, with a rush, gained the side of the assassin, clutched him by the collar, and hurled him ten feet away.

Linwood struck the ground, where he lay without sense or motion.

Bending to his knees, the young man examined the wounds of the colonel, ascertaining that the latter had been shot through the right breast, the ball having probably penetrated the lung. There was the track of another bullet on his head, which had apparently struck him, at the moment that his wounded horse had fallen.

Leon was confident that the colonel was not fatally wounded, and he was about to arise, with the intention of returning to Arline, and sending a negro for the nearest surgeon, when he heard another loud cry from the house.

Turning rapidly around, he saw that the veranda was crowded with negroes, Arline in their front, and all screaming and gesticulating.

They seemed to be staring at some object in his near vicinity, their manner and gestures indicating that he was in immediate danger.

Before, however, he had time to think or look, the report of a revolver rung sharp from a clump of rose bushes, not twenty feet from his position, a bullet tearing along his left side, through the clothing to the skin. At the same time Lawrence Linwood sprang from the covert, revolver and bowie in hand, frantic with his thirst for revenge.

Before he had passed half the distance that intervened between him and Leon, he again pulled trigger, but our young friend sunk to the earth in time to avoid the deadly bullet.

Then, with the bound of a panther, Leon was upon the miscreant, knife in hand.

Terrible was the scene that followed.

The clash of steel against steel was terrific.

"Coward! miscreant! dastard!" yelled Leon Lisle. "I have you at last!"

"Sneaking assassin, you who have stolen the praise and honor of men whose shoes you are unworthy to unloose—you must die."

"This is the first and the last time, Lawrence

Linwood, that you ever did or will face a man. Thank Heaven, I arrived in time to prevent you from thrusting your vile presence upon Arline Andrews!"

"Your very breath contaminates the air. I saved your life in the bayou only that I might not be cheated out of my revenge. I am only playing with you now, Lawrence Linwood."

"Say a prayer, if you can, for you will soon lie, stiff and stark, by your father's corpse!"

Leon rattled these words off in a rapid manner, as both were forced to draw away from each other to rest, each panting for breath.

The form of young Linwood trembled as the last words left Leon's lips; his strength and courage, born of ungovernable rage, were evidently weakening. Then as he saw that his antagonist was about to spring upon him, with a yell of terror he whirled about and dashed through the shrubbery toward the bayou, shrieking with all a coward's fear.

Leon followed in hot pursuit, for he was determined that the dastard should not escape him to work more evil in the future.

A glance toward the mansion proved that Arline had been taken inside. The negroes were hurrying to ascertain if their master was alive, and the air was full of moans and cries.

Straight for the retreat of Arline, on the banks of the bayou, dashed Lawrence Linwood, crashing through the undergrowth with howls of dread. Leon, with vengeful whoops at the recollection of the perfidious deeds of the miscreant, followed in hot pursuit, rejoicing that at last vengeance was about to be his.

He believed that Linwood had some secret object in thus pointing for the scene of his recent danger, which would favor his escape, although he had no idea what it could be.

On rushed the affrighted dastard, bounding clear of the undergrowth, directly into the little "open." There he turned, on the instant, and faced with uplifted knife, the point at which he had burst through the dense thicket.

Had Lawrence Linwood gazed beneath the hammock that swung near him, he would probably have discovered a hideous sight; for there, outstretched, lay a huge alligator, doubtless searching for its mate that had been killed by Leon Lisle.

The noisy advent of Linwood frightened the huge saurian, and it whirled to retreat into the bayou; at the same time giving a sweeping blow with its powerful tail. This struck the legs of the crouching assassin, and sent him flying over the bank.

A horrible yell of mortal terror came from Lawrence Linwood; the last he ever uttered!

Leon shuddered, as he saw both the slimy monster and his foe plunge into the gloomy depths together.

His handsome face no longer stamped with the passion of revenge, he stood and gazed down into the dark waters of the bayou.

Thus he remained, until all became still as a mirror—until he knew that, at last, his most bitter enemy, who had thrice attempted to kill him, was powerless to commit further crimes, was dead!

Leon replaced his bowie in its sheath, and strode quickly through the shades to the Andrews mansion.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HATCHET BURIED.

THERE is but little more to relate.

When Leon returned to the house, he at once dispatched a negro, on his own fleet steed, which was led from the bottom-timber, for a doctor; and had Colonel Andrews removed, with every care, to his chamber.

His hopeful words to Arline, in regard to the wounds of her father, and his assertion that Major Linwood had died of his wounds—which was the case—and that Lawrence had met death in the waters of the bayou, greatly relieved her anxiety.

The colonel lay listless and speechless, taking no notice of his daughter or Leon.

The prompt arrival of the doctor and his declaration that Colonel Andrews, with proper care and attention, would recover, had also its effect. And proper care and nursing the colonel did most assuredly receive; and he soon began to prefer the attention of Leon to any other.

But the old gentleman never asked who Leon was, or how he came to be at Paradise Plantation.

The reason of this was, that Arline, as soon as her father had sufficiently recovered, revealed to him all the perfidy of the Linwoods, and the heroic services of Leon Lisle, in having thrice saved her life; and also having rescued the colonel himself, when the knife of Major Linwood was about to be plunged into his heart.

Much of this had been already known or suspected by Colonel Andrews, and when Arline told him that his old rival, Lemuel Lisle, was dead, and that he had sent him a message of forgiveness and friendship by his son, the colonel was ready to think more kindly of

many things in the past, and to look forward more calmly to the future.

However, he said nothing of his thoughts and conclusions to either Arline or Leon.

At last, under the kind care of his attendants, Colonel Andrews was well enough to explain the strange and sudden enmity of Major Linwood.

The colonel, while in Matagorda, had agreed to Linwood's proposal that they should play again at cards, but the latter had been drinking heavily, and the result was that Colonel Andrews won not only the full amount of the balance of the major's mortgage, but also every dollar that the villainous old wretch was worth.

The major was carried from the card table to his room in a fit, but it appeared that on recovery he had escaped from his keepers and galloped after Colonel Andrews, insane with his desire for revenge. And very near to satisfying that revenge had he been, the colonel escaping death at his hands only from Leon Lisle's happening providentially to be on hand.

Need we say that three months after the tragic occurrences at Paradise Plantation very extensive preparations were made for a grand wedding?

A large concourse of the leading planters of the Lower Colorado and vicinity attended the ceremony; an extensive barbecue being one of the features of the occasion.

The bridal tour of Leon and Arline extended to their old homes in Virginia; Leon, while there, disposing of his plantation with the view of entering into partnership with his father-in-law, upon his return to Texas.

The gulch, where Leon met his fate—where he first saw and saved Arline Andrews from the monster bears of the Blue Ridge—was also visited by the happy pair, who even extended their gallop to the upper gorge, where the fierce fight was made by Leon to rescue Arline from the outlaws! How different was all now!

Both the bearskins were taken to Texas, and were often exhibited to guests at Paradise Plantation, while Colonel Andrews related the daring rescue of his daughter by the man who was now her husband.

And never was there a happier trio than these: their pride and joy being increased, when the prattle of a pretty baby was heard in the dwelling, where such sounds had never before been heard.

Major Linwood was buried beyond the limits of the plantation, at the order of Colonel Andrews; the first order given by him, after he had become sufficiently rational to take in what had occurred.

The body of Lawrence Linwood was never found; but it required no great stretch of the imagination to say what had become of it.

Mountain Mose was never heard of, after the disaster and death that had come to his band in the mountain gulch; and, it was supposed that he was one of the number that were slain by Leon Lisle, and had been torn and mangled beyond recognition by the wolves.

Thus leaving all in blissful happiness at Paradise Plantation—a happiness, which we feel assured none will envy them—we will close with the hope that, after all the trials and dangers that beset them at one time, the prosperity and felicity in which their wedded life began, and has continued until the present, may never grow less, until a greater and never ending happiness dawns upon them.

THE END.

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